

Interviewee: Kenza Dekar Raheb  
Interviewer: Lucia Z. Knoles  
Date: June 1, 2017  
Place: Jefferson, MA  
Transcriber: Lucia Z. Knoles



**Abstract:** Born in Algeria, Kenza Dekar Raheb immigrated to the United States with her husband and daughter when she was thirty-one. Since then, she has given birth to two more daughters, home-schooled her children, and worked for a community organization. Raised in Algeria to appreciate Western culture while living according to Muslim mores, Kenza began to explore religion seriously only after the birth of her first daughter. Kenza speaks frankly about her fear of going out in public in America wearing a headscarf, particularly after the Boston Marathon bombing. Frequently treated with suspicion, Kenza tells of finally breaking down one day when a stranger performs a simple act of kindness. Kenza also describes her frustration over the high price of college in America, her fear of debt, and her internal struggle over whether to give up her dreams of education. She speaks enthusiastically, however, of the opportunities she has found for herself and her children through local organizations like the library, Worcester Interfaith, the Broad Meadow Brook Sanctuary, and the Clemente Course in the Humanities. She says she has learned she can have an impact, and that although the American Dream may no longer be reachable, freedom here is real.

**LK:** What is your full name?

**KD:** Kenza Dekar is my name.

**LK:** When and where were you born?

**KD:** I was born in Algeria in 1979.

**LK:** Have you ever married?

**KD:** Yes

**LK:** And what are the names of your children and what are their ages?

**KD:** I have three wonderful daughters. Maya was born in Algeria in 2009, she just turned 8 in May 19. Miriam is my second one, and she was born in September 12, 2012. And that's an interesting story because I was scheduled for a C-section on September 11, and I said I don't want that date for my daughter.

**LK:** Good idea.

**KD:** And she decided to come on her own on September 12th. So, no C-section; no September 11. And Amina is born March 9, 2016.

**LK:** And where did you attend school?

**KD:** I attended schools in Algeria. Elementary, it was called the Haffaria. It was convenient. It was basically almost in the parking lot near where my grandmother used to live, and we used to spend a lot of time at my grandmother's for all of the elementary school. Then middle school still in Algeria, high school, college, I went to (\_\_\_\_\_???), it's a business school. I hated it, I wanted the Beaux-Arts art school, but my mother said, "You're not going to do anything with art," so I went to business school.

**LK:** Do you currently work in this country, and did you work in your home country?

**KD:** Yes, I did. I worked in logistics for a couple of years. I worked at the U.S. Embassy, at the British Embassy, and then I came here. I didn't work in the beginning, but right now I am working part time with the Worcester Family Partnership. I started going there as a parent taking my kids, and then because of my language skills, I would say, Arabic and French, they asked for help and I was hired.

**LK:** And you also home school your children?

**KD:** I do home school my kids, yes.

**LK:** So, tell me about the country you came from, starting with when you left and how old you were.

**KD:** I left Algeria in 2011, so I was thirty-three, no, thirty-one.

**LK:** An adult?

**KD:** Oh yeah, an adult.

**LK:** So why did you come?

**KD:** Well here's the thing. We used to work at the embassy and every year there was this immigration lottery, and basically it gives you the possibility to have a green card. And we really gave it a try for fun once we got married, and we said, "Okay, we're going to try." So, we tried it the first time and it didn't work. And then when Maya was born we tried again, and she was—you know—we added her, and it worked! The process took like two years, the screening and like that, so we had two years to think it over and see are we going to really go now that we have it? And we decided that we can give it a try because it was not a one-way. We had the possibility to go back. So, we wanted to give it a try and see if it would work. We have had an idea of our life in Algeria as a married couple with a kid and how unfortunately limited that was. There were no playgrounds, and so we said, "Okay, let's try." And we came here. It was

difficult in the beginning. Like the first one year and a half was really grim. It wasn't that bad, actually, because he found a job two weeks after we started, and then one year later he started working as a dental [assistant]. I had the kids and they were young so I wasn't able to work. Childcare is just out of reach, and he worked as a dental assistant because the refugee community and the Iraqis, Syrians, and he speaks Arabic, so he got the job. And after that he was hired at the Family Health Center, which is more stable. It is really a good job. And because we don't have any debt we didn't fall into that, you know, debt system. So basically, we're able to have—to make a good living, to live well with what we have. And we were content. I think we still are content.

**LK:** So let me take a step back, because when I said, “Why did you come?” you said, “We were going to try for the fun of it.” Then you said, “And there weren't many playgrounds.”

**KD:** I meant among other things.

**LK:** So talk a little more. This is a big step to take. Why?

**KD:** Obviously we didn't just come for the playgrounds. Well, here's the thing. Algeria is a beautiful country. And it has so much history. Unfortunately, it also has a lot of paradoxes. So basically, you are in a very conservative place who wants to look cool. And when you fall too much into that cool you're reminded, like pulled, “Hey, don't forget, this is a conservative place.” So, if you are to go out at night and have fun you have to choose your—you know, you have—you take the risk to be labeled. And a lot of . . .

**LK:** So, going out and doing what kind of thing can get you labeled?

**KD:** Well, for example, if you want to go out to dinner or if you want to go out to see a show at the theater, and things like that. It's just, it's a city that is so conflicted in its identity. So, we are between brackets a “Muslim” country, but then if you work for the government, like the police customs and all the law enforcement, you are not allowed to wear the headscarf in a Muslim country. And women have skirts. They don't wear pants, they have skirts, and they have to be short skirts.

**LK:** If you work for the government?

**KD:** Yes, like law enforcement things. And another example of this hypocrisy—it's very hard to—for example, there is, you know, the T.V. and the European channels, so everyone speaks French. But then, for example, in the workplace if you're a woman it's very hard to go beyond a certain level, and if you do that chances are you're labeled either “You have slept with the boss,” or things like that. And being a woman in the workplace is very, very difficult. What else? You see extremely conservative people going to the mosque and having this isolated lifestyle. But then you also see people who want to live a European lifestyle in Algeria, and you have all those streets with coffee and shops and that not everyone can afford to go, and then you have this market where everyone is condensed into cheap stuff.

**LK:** So you see that not as the freedom to make a choice but as a hypocrisy.

**KD:** I see it really as an expression of an identity crisis in this country.

**LK:** As torn between two?

**KD:** Yes, because when you make a choice you really take a risk.

**LK:** Okay, it shuts you off from all the other possibilities because those two cultures don't interact?

**KD:** Exactly, and you feel the impact of colonization still in Algeria. Because the idea was to divide and to destroy the identity, and right now people don't even know what is their identity. As you say, "Algerians, they don't identify as Muslims." Like, "Oh, I am Algerian." And then you have a group, the Berber who speak their own language, saying, "Oh, we made this country," and then the people of the south—and it is so divided. And it is exhausting to cope with that and, you know, trying to fit in a place that has so many—it is hard. My father—my father raised me more to, like, European influence. As a person I was not conservative. I do not think I am conservative. And this is very interesting because it will really tell you how the society is messed up. He raised me loving Frank Sinatra and we have all those discs at home, and we had "The Nutcracker," that he used to listen to out loud, but I was not allowed to have boyfriends, I was not allowed to bring anyone home. I was not allowed to sleep over at somebody else's house. And for example, we used to watch those movies, black and white—"Casablanca," I discovered with my father. But then, "I'm exposing you to the West and to the western culture and how beautiful it is and how fabulous, but you have to keep your conservative values."

**LK:** So you couldn't have any of the things Frank Sinatra sang about or what the movies showed you?

**KD:** Yeah, and just telling you, I was exposed to the literature, to the French literature, which is even more cheesy, even more—but it is so conflicting when you are—I always wanted—you know, I was kind of wild and wanted to live my life and travel, which I feel is what my father instilled in me. But again, I was always pulled back. You cannot do that. So why do you expose me to this altogether, and show me that there's a world out there that I cannot access? Or, if you don't want me then how about you expose the other side? Like show me what about conservatism is appealing? Why should I not? With reason explain to me. So basically, the society is completely—I feel there is a huge hypocrisy, and I really wanted to try to see if I can't raise my children having full control over what—not over their lives, because I don't think this is something I can do. But I can control the environment a little bit and explain things without having a mother or mother-in-law or just pushing those cultural . . .

**LK:** Conventions?

**KD:** Yeah.

**LK:** Do you think you internalized any of those contradictions within yourself between the kind of cosmopolitanism or Europeanism and more conservative . . .

**KD:** I do. I do. I really do. But here's the thing. Now that I'm a parent and I've cautiously decided to wear the head scarf before we come because I wanted to identify not as an Algerian not ethnicity, not nationalism, none of that, but I wanted to identify as a Muslim person and then go from there.

**LK:** But you didn't wear the headscarf in Algeria?

**KD:** I didn't wear the headscarf until Maya was six months. It was like an epiphany. It's an interesting story. So, when Maya was born it was a perfect pregnancy and everything was fine. I wrote about it in Clemente in the writing class. All of a sudden I broke my water, no contractions, nothing, and then we went to the hospital and wait for eight hours. Nothing is happening, no contractions, nothing. They try to induce. Nothing is happening. So it's a C-section. And you would think it's not a big deal, but in Algeria it was slow anesthesia. It wasn't just an epidural. I was put to sleep. And I had no clue what was going on. I was put in the back of the room on that operation table; no clothes on. This is Algeria, so again, you're in a Muslim country but then you in there and you're exposed to everyone in there in the room, and next thing I know I wake up, I ask for my baby, and they say, "She's fine." I didn't see her until four days after she was born. I was in a recovery room after the C-section.

**LK:** Is that typical?

**KD:** I don't know. And then, the question was, "What if I didn't wake up?" I was somewhere, and I have no idea where I was. I wasn't conscious of what was happening. And what if I didn't wake up? What if I died, where would I go? Well, I wasn't particularly religious. I knew in my heart and again from a cultural standpoint that I was a Muslim.

**LK:** You were a *cultural* Muslim?

**KD:** Yes. I grew up watching my grandmother praying. My father didn't. My mom not so much. But I had religious people in my family. And I had other people who were not religious but who were conservative. That's what? And then that's when my thinking started. What if I died? What would have happened? What would I have taken with me? What? And what? And why? And this is when I started looking into it. And I really decided that I wanted to identify as a Muslim; I wanted to take responsibility for who I am. And I feel like one of the ways to take responsibility is to choose to wear my headscarf because it is here and it is reminding me who I am, and it tells everyone who I am. And this is the important thing. I figured that if I put it when I was 15 I would have a head lice problem. You know? [*laughs*] Yes, I really think so. I'm not going to push it on my daughters, of course, because no one pushed it on me. But I really feel that there is more of life that you need to know and learn and I wasted so much time just waiting for my cultural background and my mom to tell me. And it's—this is the problem with Algeria, again.

**LK:** Although you were waiting for them to tell you, and you're not going to tell your daughters.

**KD:** Oh no, not about the headscarf, about looking into things, about being curious, about trying to understand. And we were not asked to understand, which is how it is. This is what you do. I don't know, I'm kind of confused.

**LK:** No, that was very useful. So, you said the first year or so was hard but you didn't mean it financially. How was it hard that first year?

**KD:** Oh, from an emotional standpoint very, very hard because I had a lot of anxiety. Again, I came with my headscarf, and I knew that a lot of people didn't like Muslims. And it was hard to—well, first I came in December to Worcester. It was depressing. It was depressing! The city was dark, and I didn't know anybody. We were in an apartment we found on Craig's list, and in that apartment there was an old woman on the ground floor. The first floor, it was a triple decker. So, the floor above her was her daughter, who lived with a huge dog and cats, and then we were on the third floor so we were always being careful not to make noise. And they were not the pleasantest people you'd deal with. And whenever we would come we would hear the old woman lock her house, and then I would go upstairs. Well, at the end, after a year, she would just wait for us, and then as soon as we'd come she'd open the door and talk to us. But it took a year, you know, for her to realize that we're cool.

**LK:** So did you change anything about your life when you came to the United States?

**KD:** Everything! Everything! You know, we went with the flow. We slept on the floor for a couple of months because Fouzi had to go to work, and I had the baby, and Maya was two years and a half. And despite my language skills—I was able to communicate in English—there was no one to tell us that, "Oh this is where you need to go: there are people who donate furniture," or all the resources available. We had no clue. We had no clue. So, we ended up going to a—after we had our phones we looked online for where we could buy mattresses, and we just walked all the way to the store and we found—okay, we're taking this and that. I remember we paid fifty dollars for the delivery. And at that time I thought, "Oh my god, fifty dollars for the delivery; that's a lot of money!" But at least we finally had mattresses, and that was celebratory.

**LK:** Did you become—when you—are there any customs you dropped when you came or new customs you picked up?

**KD:** There were a lot of things that we gave up on. My husband didn't give up on his coffee! Morning—so we had to have milk and coffee and that was like sacred. Baking. I stopped baking, not that I was doing it a lot. Because you had to think about butter is expensive, and milk, and all these things. And we had, what else? We have some celebrations. For example, Ramadan. It was very frugal because usually at Ramadan you prepare the meals and then after that you prepare a dessert and all the family gets together and so it lost a little bit of that charm because it was just us. And we tried to make it look nice but it was what it was, you know, there was just that much we could do. The bread—we love eating bread and it is very

hard to find, no offense, in Worcester, bread that doesn't have sugar in it. So, this is a funny story, one day I said, "Okay, that is it. I am going to make my own bread." But I didn't have pots and pans, literally, I didn't have any dishes—no, not dishes—baking pans and utensils. So, the old woman, once in a while she would do a yard sale because one of her daughters would buy storage rooms and then sell the stuff from there. And so I found these pie pans, they were metal pans, and I said, "Okay, I'm going to try to make our Algerian bread on these." So, I prepared the dough and all that stuff, and when I make it I had a guest over, so I was excited about it. And I put the pie pan on the gas stove and made the bread. And the next thing you know, whoooooo whooooo the fire alarm; I was in panic. And it was the first time! And I thought, "Oh my God, the firefighters are coming! How do I stop this?" So, we got the windows open, and I thought, "Okay, let's forget about the bread." And so, I had to do it in the oven, and it's not the same thing. What else? Yeah, there are a couple. Croissants—there are a lot of pastries and special things that in Algeria you would just, you know, walk down—everything was in walking distance in Algeria. Another thing, I gained a lot of weight when I came here because everything is walking distance in Algeria, the groceries, the bakeries, and here we really needed the car to do the shopping. In the beginning, we didn't have the car so I didn't gain weight at that time. I used to walk a lot, and the buses. A few months after we came I realized we were eligible for WIC [Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children], you know, women and infants, so we started having those checks for food: food checks that you go and you buy, but you are limited in the brand, you cannot buy what you want. So, Maya was two and a half, and we're having all this food and cereals and the milk. We started giving it away because it was a lot. I mean, it's amazing how you go from not having anything to having so much that you try to look for people to give it away. We had maybe four or five gallons of milk for the week or something. Huge. And cereals and so that was helpful but then we had to do groceries, so again, we would go all the way—I wasn't confident enough to go out there alone, still. I was sure that my headscarf would just make me someone everyone would look at.

**LK:** And how has that worked out?

**KD:** It works better. It was a lot of work for myself, too. You know, talking to myself saying, "Kenza, that is it. You have to go out. You have to do something, you cannot stay in the house." So, what I started to do was look into the buses. And I must say that old lady helped me. She said, "Oh there is a bus stop," and she showed me where the bus stop is, and I started from there. And then when you go inside they'll give you this pamphlet that has all these timetables. And from there I just started, and I discovered the library. And that was also—this was when I really felt I am not the only one from somewhere else. It was beautiful. There were people from all different places. There were books in Chinese! And I thought, "Oh my God, this is fantastic!" And we started going there all the time. And Maya had lots of fun with the story time and the crafts, and it was—and I also felt really good. It felt—recently I just attended a public hearing at the library where I explained how it was a safe haven for us. Because we felt in a place where we were not judged because of the language we speak or the headscarf. It was just a nice place to be. So, we spent a lot of time there. And from there, you know, it opened a lot of doors about the program there where you can go. And because it was provided by the library, I felt comfortable going there.

**LK:** So go where? I'm sorry, I got confused.

**KD:** Programs. Any programs or museums or . . .

**LK:** Things that were mentioned at the library?

**KD:** Yes, at the library I would see the flyer, and I would ask, and they would say, "Oh yes, this is nice. You should go." And I would confidently go because I was—you know, it was referred to me by the library. But till today I still don't go to places I do not know for the first time alone. I don't feel comfortable doing that. I always feel I have to have someone with me just to be more . . .

**LK:** And have you had any bad experiences wearing a headscarf?

**KD:** Yes, we did. One day, that was in the old apartment, and the guy, the landlord asked a person to come and redo the bathroom floor. So, we said we wanted it to be over the weekend because my husband is here. So, we had this guy. So the landlord wanted cheap stuff, of course. So this guy comes, and he comes in the morning and I make breakfast, I make pancakes, and we offered him to eat breakfast with us. He sits there. He gobbles all the pancakes. And he talks and he talks and then he starts. He goes to the bathroom and starts working, and then he stops, and then at that time Mary Ann, the second one was a baby, so he said, "Oh your baby cries a lot." And we said, "Well, she's a baby." And we really tried to make it as comfortable as possible for him, and I guess it's cultural too, because maybe we should have just let him do his work and ignored him. And his work, I mean it was taking so long just changing tiles which should have been—and so he doesn't finish the first Saturday. He comes back on Sunday, and on that Sunday he stays until, like, late. It was eight in the evening and he was still there, and my husband had to work. And because they redid the ceiling the bathroom light wasn't working. So how was he going to do the floor when there was no light? So, I put a chicken in the oven because I waited for him to leave to cook dinner and he didn't leave. So as soon as I put the chicken in the oven, the guy comes and puts his tiles—they were like vinyl tiles—and I said "What are you doing? This is food and this is toxic!" And then I take the food out and I tell my husband "Talk to him. He cannot keep this. It might be a fire." And he says, "No, no, no. I know what I'm doing." And of course, he forgets about them. There is smoke coming out. And the baby, you know, the kids, I take them away. And we open all the doors, and all of a sudden, I hear screaming. Not screaming, but arguing. I'm like panicked. I go back and look, and my husband is fighting with this guy, but not—he was trying to—the good thing about Fouzi, my husband, is that he really has this control and doesn't immediately fall into that, but basically what this guy said . . .

**LK:** They weren't physically fighting, they were arguing?

**KD:** They were arguing. I've never seen my husband like this. I'm like, "Fouzi, what happened? And at some point, the guy left from the back door and my husband was chasing him. And then the neighbor on the second floor started arguing with my husband too, and my husband was "Call 911, call 911!" So I called 911, and I said, "There is a fight can you please

come?" And I gave them the address. By the time the police come, the guy left. And then, I tell my husband, "What happened? What is it?" He said, "When the smoke started, I tell the guy, 'What are you trying to do, are you trying to kill us?' And the guy said, 'People like you are better off dead, anyways.' In our own house. So he said—my husband was upset, he said: "You get out now!" And then, you know, the "F-word" and they started arguing. So until later I realized—the second floor neighbor instead of helping basically because he knows the guy also tried to—basically he gangs up on him.

**LK:** On your husband?

**KD:** Yeah. So when—and we didn't see that guy again, and the bathroom was a mess for a long time. But it was—It was very, very scary. And then we started to look on other places, to other places to live. But again it creates—it sends you backwards. You feel comfortable and then something like this happens, and you go back to the state of anxiety that you were in. You say, "Oh, I've got to work on that again!" And then there was the Boston Marathon bombing that happened in 2013, and that was also tough. Because, you know, it was the first time while I was in Algeria—in this country, that something like that happened. And we went, "Oh, my God. Not a Muslim, not a Muslim, not . . ."

**LK:** We were saying the same thing.

**KD:** Yeah.

**LK:** Did you feel really different about how people responded to you after that?

**KD:** Yes. Oh my goodness! We were very, like knowing you had this bus, the driver, and they know you. We are used to take this all the time. So there was this old man, he's a bus driver, and he's the grumpy one, and we ended up getting to know him and, "Hello, how are you?" Getting to talk to him, and he liked the girls and it took me a while to leave the house after the Boston Marathon because, my mistake, I was watching the news all the time. I was plugged, whether on the social media or the T.V. I was watching, and I was watching like CNN AND Fox News; I wanted all points of view. It was exhausting. And in fact, that's what actually created more anxiety. And when I decided I had to leave the house, I had I think an appointment or something, when we actually decided to go. This same guy who was really kind to us, he looks at us, and then he looks back to his window. And then he looks back to where we put the money. And I say, "Oh, how are you today?" And he says, like, "Go sit to the back." He doesn't even say it; just with the fingers he says go to the back.

**LK:** I'm so sorry.

**KD:** You don't have to be sorry. People are entitled to the way they react to things. It was—but then slowly, slowly, he got again to be nice. Maybe he realized, I don't know, that we're not those people. And then again working on that—and I think I gained in confidence because I get to meet people who were—who made me feel comfortable and who really made me realize that most people are good. That's the thing.

**LK:** So you mentioned the library as one place that made you feel safe. Was there any other experience or place that made you feel more welcome or expansive?

**KD:** I have to tell you this. Yes, I was thinking. It was Broad Meadow Brook [Broad Meadow Brook Conservation Center & Wildlife Sanctuary] where I used to take the girls for hikes, and there were nature classes, and they had lots of fun. And the teachers were amazing. They still are. And actually right after the Boston bombing, I was driving—I just started driving so something happened again. And there was so much pressure—maybe that was it. I'm confused now with the dates. Or maybe that was—when was the Boston Marathon—2015 or 2013? I don't remember. But something like that happened where a nut job did something and we all had to apologize for it. It's just—and I was emotionally very, you know, I was churned with all this. And I was afraid to leave my house, but still, Maya had class, and I had to take her. So I said, "Okay, you cannot punish her for what's happening. You have to take her!" And I take her, and I park at Broad Meadow Brook. But then there was this man who was in his car, and he was maybe in front of me. I backed up to let him park. And then he said, "No, no, no, it's fine." And he goes and parks somewhere else. And he was really kind, right? So I see him leaving his car, so I know what he looks like. And he goes to the—now I'm getting emotional, I'm sorry—so he goes to the sanctuary, and I take Maya there. And when I take her there, I take her to class, and I'm sitting with another mom. And I see him. So I go down and I thank him for his kindness, and I say—and I started crying. And he freaked out. It's like, "What is it with this person?" But then I started crying, and I explained: "Thank you for your kindness, you're the first person I interacted with after this happened. And I was afraid to leave my house and . . ." And he started crying too. So it was just so . . . [crying]

**LK:** That's lovely.

**KD:** [still crying]

**LK:** That's okay. You were just being human beings together, you know?

**KD:** And he said that he was sorry. And he asked me where I was from, you know? So that was really—that was really intense. And I felt sorry for the guy, like, "Oh my goodness!" And he asked me—he was really nice. He said he knows; he visited Muslim countries. And he said, "I know this has nothing to do with . . ." And so, yeah. Since then, acts of kindness touch more. And I am like this. I would cry for someone being nice to me rather than someone being mean to me.

**LK:** Yes, that's true, you didn't cry when you talked about people being mean. What about the Clemente Program? [The Clemente Course in the Humanities]

**KD:** Oh my, that was—oh yeah, one of the things I had in mind when I came to this country was to go back to school. Like go back to college; have a valid degree or something. And I knew it's going to take time, but that was really the target. But then when I came and realized, "Oh, my goodness, this is—nobody told us that we would not be able to afford college or something like

that. So I kind of gave up on it. I tried, oh yes, even when I didn't have anything, as soon as I had internet connections I began looking for colleges online, you know, Phoenix University. And I called—I sent an email actually, and they called me right away. And they said, "Hey, look, we can help you!" And there was this woman, and I remember her name--- Michelle Chadder, and she was the counselor, and she used to call and talk to me for a while. So that was kind of awkward, but she kind of accompanied me. I almost got into debt with that. And like she showed me how to do it, and thank God I stopped at the right time because it took like, full scholarships that would have had outrageous debt. Anyway, but yeah, after that experience I was like, "Okay, forget it!" But it still, in the back of my mind, in my heart I want to go to college. I know I have potential. But at some point I'm like, "Okay, stop. Find a job, and work like other immigrants and make sure that your kids go to college. Forget about yourself." So and then I attended a workshop, like again, you know, the library and then I learned about the Worcester Family Partnership, where they had playgroups. And from that it opened again doors to all those community resources that were available and they gave me the blue book that has all the information. And then there was a workshop that they were cosponsoring, where they said, "Hey, there is this parent leadership workshop where you can go and we take care of the kids." "I said, Oh, I can do that. That is nice." It's different. So I do the workshop. It's amazing! I get to learn about how the community works in Worcester. I met Frank Kartheiser [Lead Organizer of Worcester Interfaith] there because he was a speaker there. And I was always a lot into Interfaith. I was again—another safe place was the mosque. I started going to the mosque because it felt really good, but I can talk about it because you mentioned apart from the library what was the other space. So I met Frank Katheiser, (\_\_\_\_\_???) Rivera, and Anne Vera who was organizing. And after that, I received the letter, like the newsletter from Andrew on all the updates and all the events going on in the community. It was fabulous! All this happening, and all so many things that you can be part of. And I say, "Okay," and then I see the Clemente Course in the Humanities and all the classes, and oh my God, this was just what I wanted. I want to take the classes! And for some reason the day I see it I see that email the deadline for registration is over. That was the first cohort. So like, "Okay, that's okay, I'm going to see if they're going to have it next year." So it was in my mind as soon as I saw the flyer. But maybe I was not just—you know, things happen for a reason, and I was not ready for it. And then the next, I was actually waiting for the flyer. I saw about the time when the other one, I went back to the email, so I was really waiting for the second to open. And as soon as it opened I sent. And I remember we were at an Interfaith fast breaking at the mosque, and Frank Kartheiser was there, and he said, "Oh, Elizabeth Bacon [Coordinator, The Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester, MA] called me," and he said "You're taking the class!" And I said, "Yes!" That was really exciting. It was an amazing experience. I could not—I cannot even—it's basically—it showed me that I can. You know all the doubts that I had and all the, you know—all of me limiting myself, and not being comfortable about my English, and not—all of this Clemente made me realize that I can do more than I think. And I think I will always be grateful for them because it was a boost in confidence. And even in my homeschooling, sometimes I have those doubts like, "Kenza, what are you doing? You are trying to raise kids like Muslims in the West. And you don't even . . ." You know, I was putting myself down. "You don't know the culture, you don't even know English very well." But then, the Clemente validated my knowledge and validated me as a person. So I was excited to take my kids to the museum and talk about all we were taught, and

take my kids to the library and look for those books and talking about philosophy and it is still in. Once you go through the Clemente it's not temporary. It has a long life, you know, impact. And I was telling Joybel [Joybel Mutesi, 2016 Graduate of the Clemente Course in the Humanities, Worcester] and Larry [Larry Maden, 2015 Graduate of the Clemente Course in the Humanities] when we went to this graduation this year which is the year after our graduation, I said, "We need to be here every graduation because we need to remember what we commit to do at our graduation. We need—in case life gets in between and we forget, we need to come back just to remember that we did this and what we promised ourselves at graduation. I promised myself that I will keep going. And I promised myself that I will go to college because this is what I want to do. And I promised myself that I will end up having the scholarly career I wanted to have. I want to be a college professor. I don't know when it's going to happen or how but that's my goal. Really.

**LK:** So, let me ask you two final questions. How have your impressions of America changed since you came here? And how have your impressions of yourself changed?

**KD:** Yes. So the impression of America, and I will be blunt, it's—it didn't change for the best, I must say. Because from afar you see what the image that America wants you to see . . .

**LK:** The ideal?

**KD:** Yes, the ideal. And it reminded me of something we did in history, how basically America was marketing her image to the world and it worked. Because the way we see it from outside and everything is possible in America. But that was at a certain time, maybe everything was possible at a certain time when you work hard you can get it in. You know, the small businesses will become empires. And today is much harder than then. And today I realize that basically if you want to stay away from debt, which is like a magnet for me, even from a religious standpoint we're not supposed to be in debt. And if you want to achieve a lot of things it is not as easy as we were told. And you know, sometimes to see beauty from the outside you really have to think about the struggle that are in the back of the scene. Now that we are here and have experienced it we've tried to explain to my brother who really wants to come, you really have to think twice. You have a great job, you can travel to Europe from where you are. You have to think it twice before coming and settling. And it's hard for people to understand because they say, "Oh, because you're there!" It isn't very—this is kind of—that was like the disappointing part. It is not as easy as—and you want right away get the beautiful house, with you know the back yard. It's just not how it works. The other thing that I'm grateful for because this is something I have really grown to appreciate how people when they believe in something they are fully in it. You know, the rallies. You know there is freedom! There is freedom, freedom to walk at any point in the day you can walk at night you can—of course there are places and you have to be safe, but there are things that are taken for granted here that these are the things that I am appreciating. Having running water all day long. Having electricity in the house. Being able to pay your bills without having to take the day off of work, online. All are basic things that people may just think, "Oh, this is normal." It is not normal. And these are the things that I got to appreciate more than other things. Of course, then of course, the parks and the playgrounds to go back to the playgrounds, and the ability to take my children now for a walk or—these are really

basic life pleasures that are not available everywhere. And I'm really appreciative of that in this country.

**LK:** And how do you think you've changed since you've been here?

**KD:** I think I've gained in maturity, really. I realize that when you are back home there was this network. The family, the cousins, so whenever something happened you could always rely on someone. And because I found myself all alone, first of all I had to kick the dust off my relationship with God and say, "Let's start over. Thank you for forgiveness." And it really, it really got me into this reflection about life. About the purpose of life. When you find yourself all of a sudden deprived of everything, you have no distractions so you are here facing your own self and you have to think what's next. What did I do up to now? Where do I want to go from now? There's nothing. This is true. It's a new start. It's really a new start at every aspect of the question. Even from a spiritual standpoint, now I know more about myself. I was distracted; I was doing everything everyone wanted me to do. And now I am thinking about doing things I want to do. And I think had I stayed in Algeria this wouldn't have happened. I would have always been in that, "Oh, my mom wants this. My husband wants this. My in-laws want this. The society wants me to do this." This and this and this and this.

**LK:** Is that in part because of the culture of Algeria is more family-connected or a woman is expected to . . . ?

**KD:** Yes, there is a lot, and I've been rejecting it my entire life. But it is hard to get away from that without again being labeled and without being ostracized. But here it was the other way around. I feel, "Well, you wanted to be all by yourself. Well here you are. What do you want to do now?" You know?

**LK:** Is there anything else you'd like to add about yourself your family, and your culture?

**KD:** You know I think there is. What I wanted to say surprisingly when I came to the U.S., I discovered my faith without the influence of the culture. And it is something very powerful because we realize our real life there was in part patriarchal, society was everything, you needed the authorization of the father for everything, the husband, and basically you have no independence. That is not true. And I got to learn it when I came here because I got to discover my faith without them. Isn't it funny, that you come to the West to end up becoming a better Muslim? Isn't it crazy? But I also discovered that my faith was not at odds with the Western culture, surprisingly. But to get to this conclusion I had to delve through Clemente into Aristotle and Plato, like you have to go far away back to the Western culture and how it started and it is really not at odds. So, there is a lot of work to do, and I learned that I can have an impact. And I just maybe now with the kids very small, I have an impact. You cannot be created; you cannot be in this world and just dwell without leaving truth. And that is something that tells you—someone who is lacking confidence like me—this is powerful. You have an impact.