

Mill Valley Oral History Program
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EBRAHIM NANA

**An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Debra Schwartz in 2016**

TITLE: Oral History of Ebrahim Nana
INTERVIEWER: Debra Schwartz
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Recorded at the Islamic Center of Mill Valley, Ebrahim Nana, one of the original Board members of Mill Valley's first mosque (or masjid), recounts a life devoted to family, community, and religion. Born in 1951 in Mumbai, India, Ebrahim grew up in Thailand where one branch of his transnational merchant family has been living for two centuries. Ebrahim describes coming to California in 1969 to study industrial engineering at U.C. Berkeley and later doing a master's at Stanford. In 1977, he moved to Mill Valley to manage the Hi-Ho Hotel (now Mill Valley Travelodge), which his father had purchased, whereupon he started his own family and began pursuing various entrepreneurial ventures. Ebrahim describes the founding of the Islamic Center in 1991 and explains some of the basic beliefs and practices of Islam. He remarks on the general support his community has received from Mill Valley's residents and praises the natural beauty of Marin.

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Oral History of Ebrahim Nana
October 19th, 2016

Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Ebrahim Nana, who made minor corrections and clarifications.

0:00:01 Debra Schwartz: Today is October 19th, 2016. With me today is Ebrahim Nana. We are at the Islamic Center and Masjid of Mill Valley on 62 Shell Road. My name is Debra Schwartz and I'm delighted to have this opportunity to speak with you, Ebrahim.

0:00:25 Ebrahim Nana: Thank you.

0:00:27 Debra Schwartz: We are recording this conversation for the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Library. This is a wonderful opportunity for our community to understand better your community and what goes on here for some years now, here in Mill Valley. Okay, let us begin with just a basic understanding about you, your story, where you were born, your people, your parents, if you can, generally. Please include names and dates where you can, and tell us what happened in your life, just basic family history, please, before you come to Mill Valley.

0:01:13 Ebrahim Nana: I was born in 1951 in Mumbai, India. I grew up in Bangkok, Thailand. I came to this country when I was 18. I was at UC Berkeley for four years, did my bachelor's there, and then I was at Stanford for one year, did my master's there. And then I went back to Thailand. I was there for two to three years. In the interim, my father had bought this motel in Mill Valley.

0:01:49 Debra Schwartz: This motel?

0:01:52 Ebrahim Nana: It used to be called the Hi-Ho Hotel. Now it's the Mill Valley Travelodge.

0:01:56 Debra Schwartz: Located on —

0:01:57 Ebrahim Nana: 707 Redwood Highway. And that led me to move here and I've been here since, '77 to '16 — almost 40 years, 39 years.

0:02:15 Debra Schwartz: Let's take the opportunity to go over some of the information you've just shared. You were born in Mumbai?

0:02:21 Ebrahim Nana: Yes.

0:02:22 Debra Schwartz: But Bangkok, Thailand is —

0:02:25 Ebrahim Nana: My family's been there for 200 years. I have a lot of family that's part Thai. We're one of the few Nanans that are still 100% Indian origin, Indian blood. We've been there a long time. If you ever go to Bangkok —

0:02:47 Debra Schwartz: I have been.

0:02:49 Ebrahim Nana: It's a major road, Nana North, Nana South. If you take the monorail, there's a Nana station. My family has a long history there.

0:03:02 Debra Schwartz: 200 years of living in Bangkok, and your family has seen a lot of change in that region. It's a very busy metropolitan area.

0:03:12 Ebrahim Nana: Definitely. It's really grown. I still try to go back once a year.

0:03:20 Debra Schwartz: Excellent food, by the way.

0:03:22 Ebrahim Nana: I don't like Thai food.

0:03:23 Debra Schwartz: No?

0:03:26 Ebrahim Nana: [laughs] There's some spice in there I don't like. There's some smell that —

0:03:29 Debra Schwartz: Interesting.

0:03:31 Ebrahim Nana: But I like the Malay food, the south Thai food.

0:03:37 Debra Schwartz: So, your ancestors — 200 years, we're talking a few generations back, they came from —

0:03:45 Ebrahim Nana: From India, so our people — India has very many different ethnic groups and different communities. Our people are traders, were traders, and you'll find members from our community all over Southeast Asia — in Burma, Thailand, Singapore, Java, Indonesia, Mauritius in the Indian Ocean, South Africa. We basically traded back and forth, we were traders. But usually we would come back to our hometowns to marry. I grew up in Thailand. My wife, same community, grew up in Burma, but the connection is always to the hometown.

0:04:45 Debra Schwartz: So, you're accustomed to moving around but finding your home, in your origin then?

0:04:52 Ebrahim Nana: It's been two homes really, Thailand and here. I haven't moved that much around.

0:04:57 Debra Schwartz: What was your life like in Thailand growing up?

0:05:03 Ebrahim Nana: It was a very good life. We had servants, we had —

0:05:12 Debra Schwartz: You had what?

0:05:12 Ebrahim Nana: We had servants. If you're middle class you can live very comfortably there compared to here.

0:05:23 Debra Schwartz: So, you come to California to go to UC Berkeley?

0:05:26 Ebrahim Nana: Yes.

0:05:28 Debra Schwartz: And this is what year?

0:05:29 Ebrahim Nana: 1969.

0:05:31 Debra Schwartz: Wow, that's an interesting year to be going to UC Berkeley.

0:05:34 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. So, I went to an American school in Thailand in the privileged — it was a private American school in Thailand. So, it was natural that after I finished there that I was coming here.

0:05:55 Debra Schwartz: Natural?

0:05:57 Ebrahim Nana: It was a natural progression to come to America.

0:06:00 Debra Schwartz: You mean that your people believed that if you —

0:06:02 Ebrahim Nana: No, it was just like —

0:06:03 Debra Schwartz: Your family.

0:06:04 Ebrahim Nana: I finished, yeah. I didn't know to really read or write Thai to go to a Thai university, so my choices were limited.

0:06:12 Debra Schwartz: Oh, that's interesting.

0:06:14 Ebrahim Nana: Because I went to an American school.

0:06:15 Debra Schwartz: So because you spoke English language and your family —

0:06:19 Ebrahim Nana: My father was never sure he wanted to stay permanently in Thailand, so therefore he, unlike my other relatives who went to Thai schools — my family, all my brothers and sister, went to English-speaking schools.

0:06:40 Debra Schwartz: So you go to U.C. Berkeley at a very —

0:06:44 Ebrahim Nana: 18.

0:06:45 Debra Schwartz: 18 years old?

0:06:46 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

0:06:47 Debra Schwartz: Would you say you were a mature 18-year-old?

0:06:51 Ebrahim Nana: It was a shock. Unlike other immigrants from my community that had somebody here, I was basically on my own for a long time.

0:07:02 Debra Schwartz: So you come as a young, 18-year-old man from a different culture and country to California in the height of upheaval.

0:07:09 Ebrahim Nana: That's right, and because most of the students at my high school in Thailand were children of military personnel — officers that were fighting in Vietnam, but they kept the families in Thailand. Very, very different, very conservative, very supportive of the war in Vietnam. But as I came to Berkeley and it was exactly the opposite, and I had been totally brainwashed into that it was a right war, and I had to struggle to get the other viewpoint in my mind, and it was — I just had this self-righteous thing that that was absolutely the right thing to do, for the U.S. to be in Vietnam and Laos and Cambodia.

0:08:05 Debra Schwartz: Did that affect your relationships with other students and teachers?

0:08:08 Ebrahim Nana: Not really, no, it didn't. It was an interesting discussion point. I had a different viewpoint than most of the students.

0:08:22 Debra Schwartz: Well, what's going on there at that time? We've got the free speech movement —

0:08:27 Ebrahim Nana: That's right.

0:08:28 Debra Schwartz: We've got the Black Panthers.

0:08:30 Ebrahim Nana: Black Panthers.

0:08:32 Debra Schwartz: On campus.

0:08:32 Ebrahim Nana: We had demonstrations when the U.S. went into Cambodia, Laos, I can't even remember. We actually had one quarter that we shut down school, basically.

0:08:46 Debra Schwartz: Were you ever afraid there, while all this was going on? Did you ever feel physically —

0:08:50 Ebrahim Nana: No.

0:08:51 Debra Schwartz: No?

0:08:52 Ebrahim Nana: About the only thing was I got a can of tear gas that tore one of my pants, so other than that, no.

0:09:00 Debra Schwartz: Did this experience change your view of the Vietnam War?

0:09:04 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, I mean, I became more neutral, more understanding of both sides of the conflict, than just pro-war, and it started when I came here.

0:09:17 Debra Schwartz: When you would go back home to Thailand, were you able to comfortably share your experiences in California with the people there?

0:09:27 Ebrahim Nana: I guess we really didn't talk politics much, but at that time, everyone knew Berkeley was very liberal and very political.

0:09:37 Debra Schwartz: You knew that going in?

0:09:38 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, we knew that going in, but it was still a culture shock coming from a very different environment, different country — just a whole shift in everything.

0:09:55 Debra Schwartz: Do you think that early experience helped form your ability to interact with different groups, or different points of view overall?

0:10:07 Ebrahim Nana: Probably. And I also met a lot of foreign students from other countries, so they shaped some of my thinking, and I was one of the few undergrad Muslim students at Berkeley at that time. A lot of Muslim graduate students sort of took on a father role for me, made sure I didn't go off the right track, so I had a good support network here, I was lucky.

0:10:53 Debra Schwartz: Oh, that's interesting. And then there's Muhammad Ali, a great athlete who has —

0:11:00 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, who had just been put in prison for refusing to go to Vietnam. But at that time Muhammad Ali was —

0:11:08 Debra Schwartz: Cassius Clay.

0:11:10 Ebrahim Nana: He was with the Nation of Islam, which we didn't recognize as right Islam, so I think it was later on that he converted to Orthodox Islam. At that time, he was still with the Nation. So yeah, at that time it was like the only thing in common was the name. Other than that, the beliefs were very, very deviated.

0:11:40 Debra Schwartz: So you come home, you do your full undergrad at Berkeley, and what's your major?

0:11:45 Ebrahim Nana: Industrial engineering.

0:11:46 Debra Schwartz: Industrial engineering. And then you go back to Thailand?

0:11:49 Ebrahim Nana: No, I go to Stanford for another year.

0:11:51 Debra Schwartz: Then you go to Stanford, which is a very different kind of campus.

0:11:55 Ebrahim Nana: That's right, very much more conservative than Berkeley.

0:11:57 Debra Schwartz: How did that feel?

0:12:00 Ebrahim Nana: I was there only for nine months, did my master's and got out of there. I didn't even go to my graduation ceremony. I flew out that next day. I just wanted to get out of studying.

0:12:16 Debra Schwartz: You're now what 18, 19, 20? How old are you?

0:12:19 Ebrahim Nana: 65.

0:12:20 Debra Schwartz: No, but then when you're leaving Stanford.

0:12:22 Ebrahim Nana: 23.

0:12:23 Debra Schwartz: So you'd been in academia since you were 18, and you were ready to stop the pressure of academia.

0:12:29 Ebrahim Nana: Yep.

0:12:31 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, but did it occur to you you'd gone from one particular kind of university to another that was so —

0:12:38 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. And the one thing that I hated the most about Stanford was they had an honor code, where you could take your exam and take it home, and I was shocked. So I didn't end up with as good a set of grades as I'd had at Berkeley, because I was one of the few students that did not cheat or cahoot, so I didn't like that.

0:13:13 Debra Schwartz: Oh, interesting. This is a moral issue for you, you can see other students —

0:13:20 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, they all got caught together for an exam, five

questions, you need to take one, and I was there by myself — but hey, at least I felt good about what I achieved.

0:13:32 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, but it was disappointing to you to see other students—

0:13:34 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, at Berkeley they assume everyone was a crook. They had monitors and proctors that walked the halls and checked. Stanford was absolutely the opposite. So at that time — I don't know what it's like there now.

0:13:50 Debra Schwartz: I'm a Berkeley grad, and they're very careful.

0:13:53 Ebrahim Nana: Berkeley's still very — but Stanford, I don't know whether they still have the honor code or not. I have no idea.

0:14:00 Debra Schwartz: So, you're done with school now. You've been in California all these years and —

0:14:06 Ebrahim Nana: So I go back to Thailand and I —

0:14:08 Debra Schwartz: Bangkok?

0:14:08 Ebrahim Nana: Bangkok. I start work for Lever Brothers. It's a British Dutch conglomerate. I think they're traded in the stock market as Unilever. They make soap, detergents, they make a lot of stuff. So I started there as a management trainee. And two very, very good years there, and just by accident I ended up having to manage the motel here. My father had bought it for a relative to manage.

0:14:52 Debra Schwartz: So when did your father buy the hotel?

0:14:55 Ebrahim Nana: '76.

0:14:55 Debra Schwartz: '76. So you were out of college by then?

0:15:00 Ebrahim Nana: I was working for Lever Brothers then.

0:15:03 Debra Schwartz: And your dad, who's still not sure if he wants to be in Thailand or not —

0:15:06 Ebrahim Nana: So he my father had shifted funds here. He had money in the stock market and then he had a relative that was a structural engineer from India but couldn't get a job because he didn't know seismic engineering, so this gentleman was supposed to manage the motel for him, and it didn't work out. I ended up being stuck.

0:15:39 Debra Schwartz: You felt stuck coming to Mill Valley?

0:15:42 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, I was not happy.

0:15:43 Debra Schwartz: You were unhappy?

0:15:44 Ebrahim Nana: I had a very good life in Thailand. I'm a manager at Lever Brothers, I'm a member of the Royal Bangkok Sports Club.

0:15:52 Debra Schwartz: Sounds like a privileged —

0:15:54 Ebrahim Nana: Privileged life, yeah. And here I manage the motel, basically — not 24 hours but close to middle of the — I had a night clerk that worked five nights, but the two nights he didn't come, if someone rang the night bell at 2:00 in the morning then I'd have to get up and deal with that.

0:16:18 Debra Schwartz: Wasn't there a restaurant there too?

0:16:21 Ebrahim Nana: Henderson's Grandmother.

0:16:23 Debra Schwartz: Henderson's Grandmother was the name of the restaurant?

0:16:25 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, we didn't manage that. It was leased from us, hence —

0:16:29 Debra Schwartz: May I ask if you have siblings?

0:16:31 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, I have three brothers and a sister.

0:16:34 Debra Schwartz: And their names?

0:16:35 Ebrahim Nana: Ahmad, Ilyas, Ozair, and the sister is Aisha.

0:16:41 Debra Schwartz: And nobody else wants to come take the position?

0:16:45 Ebrahim Nana: The two younger brothers were too young, and Ahmad didn't have a visa here.

0:16:54 Debra Schwartz: But you'd gone to school here.

0:16:57 Ebrahim Nana: My brothers had also gone. Ahmad had also gone to Berkeley with me one year after and also into Stanford the year after I went, but he just had a student visa. He didn't have a permanent visa.

0:17:12 Debra Schwartz: And what about your father? Why didn't he come?

0:17:15 Ebrahim Nana: He had business in Thailand, so he had just bought this property as an investment.

0:17:23 Debra Schwartz: And did you have a family by then?

0:17:24 Ebrahim Nana: I had a wife, yeah.

0:17:25 Debra Schwartz: No children?

0:17:26 Ebrahim Nana: No children.

0:17:27 Debra Schwartz: So this year is what year?

0:17:29 Ebrahim Nana: '77 is when I ended up being here.

0:17:35 Debra Schwartz: So Mill Valley in '77, let's talk about that. Let's talk about how you've come back and now you've got an adjustment not just to university and all the tear gas flying, all the various social upheavals. Now you're in a more moderate environment in some ways.

0:17:54 Ebrahim Nana: Managing a motel is not very challenging. It was pretty boring stuff, so I tried to find other things to do, and I became a real estate developer. We got an option on 87 acres in Tiburon that we eventually developed.

0:18:22 Debra Schwartz: Is that Moitoza land?

0:18:24 Ebrahim Nana: No, it's on Via Los Altos, where the synagogue is, the Kol Shofar synagogue, f you go up the hill, up to the top.

0:18:32 Debra Schwartz: Behind that little shopping center as you take a left to the Cove?

0:18:39 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, as you pass the Cove, and then on the corner there's the Kol Shofar. Before Kol Shofar, if you made a left turn that's Via Los Altos. Beyond the first few homes, we developed that whole area there. So, other things kept me occupied. I tried to do an import/export business importing different things from Thailand. I've done probably a hundred — I'm a serial entrepreneur, businessman. Sometimes I made money, sometimes I lost money. But the motel was still the main investment at that time.

0:19:30 Debra Schwartz: Mm-hmm. So did you have your children then once you settled?

0:19:33 Ebrahim Nana: It was '78. My first son Abdullah was born here.

0:19:38 Debra Schwartz: What's your son's name?

0:19:39 Ebrahim Nana: Abdullah.

0:19:39 Debra Schwartz: Abdullah.

0:19:42 Ebrahim Nana: So the Tiburon project turned out to be a bad investment. We went through a water moratorium and a building moratorium.

0:20:04 Debra Schwartz: There was the drought in the '70s, the late '70s.

0:20:06 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, '80s. And so meanwhile, we lived at the motel for 20 years, so it was not an easy life.

0:20:21 Debra Schwartz: What would you say would be the most challenging part about living in a motel on Highway 101?

0:20:26 Ebrahim Nana: It was more for the children that it was difficult, but we got used to it. We don't believe in interest. We don't give or take money in interest, so until we had money, only then we build our homes on Seaver.

0:20:57 Debra Schwartz: When you say you don't believe in interest, does that mean that in the banking system you set up accounts with —

0:21:03 Ebrahim Nana: No, we set up accounts. We just don't borrow money or loan money at interest.

0:21:10 Debra Schwartz: Okay, yes. Logical reasons why you might want to avoid that.

0:21:18 Ebrahim Nana: Basically, we couldn't go and move until we had our own cash.

0:21:27 Debra Schwartz: Right, right. When you say, "We don't borrow," do you mean your particular family or in the Islamic tradition?

0:21:35 Ebrahim Nana: Islamic tradition, mostly you should not, no. Some scholars have different interpretations, but most scholars really don't believe interest is allowed.

0:21:52 Debra Schwartz: Let's segue away a little bit into the discussion of your religion and the part that it plays in your life here in Marin County. And a lot of people I think would be interested just to understand what Islam is to you and in the community here that you've created. Were you a practicing Muslim in Thailand then?

0:22:21 Ebrahim Nana: Yes, I was born a Muslim. My father taught us Islam during our summer breaks. I never went to a formal Islamic school or Sunday school. I don't know. But my grandfather, who was involved in our business there, my father was the only son. They were very strict on that at least that our business dealings should be Islamic business dealings. For example, we believed that even one penny of ill-gotten wealth contaminates all our wealth. At that time, we would rent a motel room for \$29.99, and my father would force me to go give a penny back. People would leave \$30 and not

bother for the change, but it did get hard many times. My family was very strict on that.

0:23:43 Debra Schwartz: So you're living here pretty much away from the mosques you might be involved in in Thailand, and you're continuing with your prayers and the traditions of your religion?

0:23:58 Ebrahim Nana: America is a very open country, very allowing of practicing of different faiths. For example, in Thailand, at that time, Muslims' names were not allowed. It had to be a name that was in a Thai dictionary. So, if the name was not in a Thai dictionary, it was not allowed.

0:24:25 Debra Schwartz: You mean the name of a —

0:24:27 Ebrahim Nana: Any name.

0:24:28 Debra Schwartz: Any name at all?

0:24:29 Ebrahim Nana: If it was not in a Thai dictionary you couldn't give that person that name. So basically, Muslim names were very rare. So my Thai name is Ek, which means one.

0:24:44 Debra Schwartz: It is what?

0:24:45 Ebrahim Nana: Ek. E-K, which means one meaning the first-born. And, my father basically said, "I'm not going to give them the satisfaction of any Thai name." So, "One" means nothing. I mean, there's no context behind that.

0:25:04 Debra Schwartz: So you resented that restriction.

0:25:09 Ebrahim Nana: Yes. 10% of the Thai population was Muslim, but you couldn't from a name tell whether this person was Muslim or not.

0:25:25 Debra Schwartz: Were there any other restrictions to practicing your religion or your beliefs?

0:25:28 Ebrahim Nana: I was too young to know. But I just remember the name was a sore point for my father.

0:25:37 Debra Schwartz: So you come here and —

0:25:38 Ebrahim Nana: Here it's totally open. I could use my name. When I worked at Lever Brothers I used my Thai name.

0:25:57 Debra Schwartz: So you're allowed to use your name here.

0:25:57 Ebrahim Nana: Yes, which is a big deal. [chuckles] This country is much

more open and much more understanding. For example, in the Thai culture pointing your foot is an ultimate insult.

0:26:19 Debra Schwartz: Pointing?

0:26:19 Ebrahim Nana: Your foot to somebody like that.

0:26:21 Debra Schwartz: Just lifting your foot?

0:26:23 Ebrahim Nana: Or just pointing. Or to sit with your legs crossed and —

0:26:26 Debra Schwartz: And having the toe point towards another — touching of the head too, isn't it?

0:26:29 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. But I remember once, I was in court and I was sitting like this, and the judge told our attorney that, "Hey, tell this guy to sit properly." [chuckles] So it's a different culture.

0:26:47 Debra Schwartz: So you come here and although you don't like the actual accommodations in the hotel, you do have other freedoms: you can practice your —

0:26:56 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. But, see, at the time religion was not an all-encompassing thing in life. It's very practical. The main requirement is five times a day, forget the world around you and make your prayers in prescribed manner, prescribed time. It takes about five minutes each, so it's not very intrusive.

0:27:27 Debra Schwartz: I'm curious about a couple of things about the five times a day prayers. First of all, do you have somebody call out that there will be prayer, like they do in Mecca and places?

0:27:37 Ebrahim Nana: A Muslim is required to pray five times a day in this time period. For example, the morning prayer can be made any time between dawn and sunrise. Today dawn is around 6:00, sunrise is around 7:15, so the morning prayer can be made any time between that. If you're on your own, you can make it as early as dawn or just before sunrise. We as a congregation choose a time; 6:30 we figure is convenient to everybody. So, every Muslim is required to pray individually as a minimum, but if they can join a congregation it's better. So the call to prayer is to let people living near around a masjid or a mosque to let them know that the time, the congregation prayer's getting close.¹

0:28:38 Debra Schwartz: Do you have a call to prayer here?

0:28:39 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, but our use permit restricts us to using it to make a call to prayer within the building.

¹ Masjid is the Arabic word for "mosque."—Editor.

0:28:47 Debra Schwartz: Do you call to prayer?

0:28:50 Ebrahim Nana: Once in a while if nobody else does. So in our masjid, maybe 50 to 100 people have keys, we don't have any key control or anything, so who knows where the keys end up. And whoever comes first for that prayer makes a call to prayer.

0:29:09 Debra Schwartz: Would you mind sharing that call to prayer and telling me what it means?

0:29:13 Ebrahim Nana: Sure.

0:29:14 Debra Schwartz: Okay, I'd love it.

0:29:15 Ebrahim Nana: Usually they select someone that has a good voice and good, but I don't. So, it's very, very simple. Shall I just give the translation?

0:29:27 Debra Schwartz: Yes, please.

0:29:28 Ebrahim Nana: So basically, "Allahu Akbar, Allahu Akbar," which means Allah is the greatest, Allah is the greatest. "Ash-hadu an la ilaha ill-Allah." There's no Allah but Allah.

0:29:42 Debra Schwartz: So how would you say it like you would if you were calling out?

[Ebrahim recites the Muslim call to prayer in Arabic and then translates it.]

0:29:53 Ebrahim Nana: There is no Allah but Allah. There is no Allah but Allah.

[Ebrahim continues in Arabic.]

0:29:56 Ebrahim Nana: The Prophet Muhammad is his messenger. The Prophet Muhammad is his messenger.

0:30:00 Ebrahim Nana: "Hayya' alas salah, hayya' alas salah." Come to prayer, come to prayer. Then, "Hayya'alal falah, hayya'alal falah." Come to success, come to success. Then, "Ashadu an la ilaha illa-llah." I bear witness there is no Allah but Allah.

0:30:16 Debra Schwartz: So, that's the call to prayer, that brings people together here at the mosque?

0:30:21 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, so here it's just more of a—because there are no neighbors and we don't have a minaret or a tower—it's more of a show thing.

0:30:40 Debra Schwartz: Or is it part of the ceremony?

0:30:42 Ebrahim Nana: It's part of the ceremony. It's required, it has to be done, but it's not having the effect of calling people that are outside.

0:30:52 Debra Schwartz: Not here?

0:30:53 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, not here.

0:30:53 Debra Schwartz: But it still is the tradition.

0:30:54 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, it's still the tradition.

0:30:56 Debra Schwartz: And then the prayer in itself, there's the way that you pray.

0:31:00 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. There's a prescribed way, a prescribed manner. So we face Makkah, that's why you'll see this carpet's at a diagonal.

0:31:10 Debra Schwartz: Yes, I see that I'm in a room right now, this is the women's prayer room.

0:31:13 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. And so the prayer direction is this way.

0:31:16 Debra Schwartz: Yes.

0:31:17 Ebrahim Nana: Which is —

0:31:18 Debra Schwartz: North.

0:31:18 Ebrahim Nana: North, north-east. If you're going to Europe, the airlines go over the north, north-east route. So, to Makkah, the closest direction is north, north-east.

0:31:33 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:31:37 Ebrahim Nana: So like I said, it's very simple, it has different steps.

0:31:46 Debra Schwartz: The prayer itself.

0:31:47 Ebrahim Nana: Right.

0:31:47 Debra Schwartz: The positions that you take.

0:31:48 Ebrahim Nana: You go through different positions. So you stand and you start with "Allahu akbar," forget the world, leave the world behind us now. We should be imagining we're in front of our creator.

0:32:06 Debra Schwartz: In front of your creator.

0:32:07 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

0:32:08 Debra Schwartz: So the first position is one that —

0:32:10 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, you start “Allahu akbar” — basically, now this world should be behind you. You should be concentrated.

0:32:19 Debra Schwartz: So, you’re showing me — for those that can’t see us. You have both fingers point to your ears and then the hands up.

0:32:25 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, Allahu Akbar. Now, that means you’re now in prayer.

0:32:28 Debra Schwartz: Oh, we’re now in prayer.

0:32:29 Ebrahim Nana: And now, you should be trying to be in deep concentration. Imagining you’re in front of your creator. You’re asking the creator for guidance. You’re acknowledging his greatness, acknowledging he’s the owner of the day of judgment. And then, asking him to take us in the right direction to paradise and not the wrong direction that’s going to take us to hell. So that’s sort of the crux of that. And then you go and you bow, you prostrate; that’s again showing your humility to the creator. So it’s a very simple way to remind yourself of the purpose of our creation, why I’m on this earth. I’m here just for a short time, to obey the commands of Allah and to realize the greatness of Allah. So it’s very simple. People make Islam much more difficult than what it really is. It’s very, very simple.

0:34:01 Debra Schwartz: Seems rather serene, actually, that you would take a time several times in a very busy life, to take a moment to remind yourself of your purpose.

0:34:10 Ebrahim Nana: That’s right. It’s a way to get back to the purpose of your life. Otherwise, you could get so caught up in this world, you don’t remember. So it sort of forces one to constantly reevaluate how his life is going and “Do I have my priorities right?”

0:34:40 Debra Schwartz: I noticed when we came in, one of the prayer sessions was just completing and it was primarily men. I did not see any women.

0:34:46 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, so most of the members here are from the Hanafi school of thought.

0:34:53 Debra Schwartz: The what?

0:34:53 Ebrahim Nana: Hanafi.

0:34:54 Debra Schwartz: Hanafi.

0:34:54 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. So first of all, we’re a Sunni congregation. 88%, 90%

of the Muslims in the world are Sunni. And within the Sunni there are four schools of thought, and we recognize each other. So in the Hanafi school of thought, it's not that important for women to come to the mosque, the masjid.

0:35:20 Debra Schwartz: And why is that?

0:35:27 Ebrahim Nana: I'm not a scholar, but women have other important responsibilities. They need to be at home taking care of children, or whatever. So they're more secure at home, when they go out they may get harassed. So it's unnecessary and there's no need for them to go to the masjid.

0:36:00 Debra Schwartz: But they do pray at home?

0:36:01 Ebrahim Nana: Of course, of course, they still have to pray at home.

0:36:02 Debra Schwartz: How young are the young men that come? What age do they start coming?

0:36:08 Ebrahim Nana: Islam, we believe all our accountability, our book of records start when you reach puberty. So anything children do before puberty doesn't count. But in order to get kids used to praying, most people try to get them praying at an early age. But then when they reach puberty, then they're now obligated.

0:36:42 Debra Schwartz: Do you have a ceremony for that time when — no?

0:36:45 Ebrahim Nana: No.

0:36:45 Debra Schwartz: They just start coming?

0:36:47 Ebrahim Nana: Well, they come, so the first rows are adult males, men that have reached puberty, and then the last row is boys that have not reached puberty. And then women here, women that have reached puberty, and then girls that are not would be on the back row.

0:37:12 Debra Schwartz: But in this mosque we would have women in another room?

0:37:15 Ebrahim Nana: Here.

0:37:16 Debra Schwartz: Yes, and with those doors open so that they can see, no?

0:37:21 Ebrahim Nana: No, they're closed. We're a very conservative masjid here. There is a microphone, they can hear everything but—

0:37:30 Debra Schwartz: They cannot see though, that edifice?

0:37:33 Ebrahim Nana: No.

0:37:36 Debra Schwartz: Not that different from the conservative Jewish synagogue, actually, in San Francisco. They separate the men from the women. So tell me about this place we're sitting in right now. Tell me the story of —

0:37:57 Ebrahim Nana: So this place used to be a Baptist church, and Baptist students at the seminary basically built this.

0:38:07 Debra Schwartz: The seminary in Tiburon, the Baptist seminary.

0:38:10 Ebrahim Nana: Strawberry.

0:38:11 Debra Schwartz: Oh, in Strawberry, right, excuse me, in Strawberry, that just recently sold.

0:38:15 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. So they had built this Baptist church and I guess a lot of the students had graduated and they didn't have a need for this anymore. So my son had a friend—his parents still live a few doors down—and actually I was on the pilgrimage, and my brother brought him to the birthday party and he saw the for sale sign and we negotiated and we got it.

0:38:48 Debra Schwartz: So two questions for you. We'll get back to the pilgrimage, what that means for you, but also we, who is "we?"

0:38:58 Ebrahim Nana: We're a family, a very close-knit family. In my business, all four brothers are involved. I have my three sons working, my brother has got his kids working. So we do everything as an entity.

0:39:18 Debra Schwartz: So we being who started this mosque, is your family, your —

0:39:26 Ebrahim Nana: The funds came from somewhere.

0:39:27 Debra Schwartz: Okay, so funds came from somewhere and you —

0:39:32 Ebrahim Nana: We ended up being the trustees for this masjid. So my family are the trustees.

0:39:41 Debra Schwartz: But you have a broader Muslim community that supported your endeavor? Is that what you mean to say? The funds came from somebody? I feel I'm walking on tricky territory here. I don't mean to invade anything.

0:39:58 Ebrahim Nana: In Islam the right hand shouldn't know what the left hand gives.

0:40:03 Debra Schwartz: I don't think I know exactly what that means.

0:40:11 Ebrahim Nana: So any type of charity or donations should be done discreetly, otherwise it doesn't count. If you do any good deeds for show, those are not acceptable in the eyes of Allah.

0:40:32 Debra Schwartz: It's generosity for the sake of giving and supporting, and nothing more.

0:40:35 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. On the day of judgment, Allah will bring three people forth and ask them, "What did you do for me?" This one person will say, "Well, I went and fought in your battles, and I got killed in the battle, and I did it all for your sake." And Allah will say, "You lie, you did it so that people will call you a courageous warrior." Another person will be called up, "What did you do for me?" He'll say, "I became this great scholar, I gave these talks and had so many people convert to Islam, and I did that all for your sake." And Allah will say, "You lie, you did it for your name," and he'll be thrown into the hellfire. The third person will be asked, "What did you do for me?" He'll say, "I gave millions in charity, I dug wells, built schools, built masjids, all that, and I did it all for your sake." And Allah will say, "No, you lie, you did it so that people will say 'wow, what a generous man.'" So good deeds have to be done with the right intention.

0:41:49 Debra Schwartz: So if another fellow or woman or man comes up and the question is put to them, "What did you do?" And they said, "Nothing, I tried to be, to follow the word of God," then the gates open to heaven?

0:42:05 Ebrahim Nana: Yes. There's a story of a man that was drunk all the time. People always saw him drunk and this man died and the followers of the prophet, came to the prophet and said, "In our dreams we saw this man in paradise. How could that be? This guy, this man was always drunk. We never saw him do anything." So the prophet replied that once in his drunken stage he saw a dog dying of thirst and said, "For the sake of Allah, this is one of our Allah's creatures," gave this dog some water. He did only one good deed in his life, but he did it with the right sincerity. So Allah gave him paradise. Good deeds by themselves don't count. Good deeds have to be with the right intention.

0:43:04 Debra Schwartz: In the history of Islam, the origin goes back to the 6th century, correct?

0:43:10 Ebrahim Nana: That's right.

0:43:12 Debra Schwartz: Before Islam it was not —

0:43:14 Ebrahim Nana: That's actually not correct.

0:43:16 Debra Schwartz: No?

0:43:17 Ebrahim Nana: We believe there's just been one religion of God since the

start of mankind.

0:43:23 Debra Schwartz: Oh.

0:43:25 Ebrahim Nana: So, we believe throughout time and space, Allah sent messengers, many of the messengers are the same in the Jewish scriptures and Christian scriptures. We believe there's been something like 124,000 messengers, the Quran mentions only about 100 by name. We believe that anyone that followed the righteous prophet of his time was a Muslim. So the righteous followers of Adam, the righteous followers of Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, we believe all of them to be Muslims, and then the earlier prophets' messengers were more tribal, more local, more regional, but the final prophet, the Prophet Muhammad Sallallahu Wasallam's messages are universal for all mankind. And he's the last prophet.

0:44:28 Debra Schwartz: Who is?

0:44:30 Ebrahim Nana: The Prophet Muhammed is the last prophet.

0:44:31 Debra Schwartz: Muhammed. Yes. And he is in the 6th century.

0:44:34 Ebrahim Nana: He's in the 6th century. So we believe in all the prior prophets, and we believe all their righteous followers were also Muslims.

0:44:47 Debra Schwartz: I forgot to ask you before, the direction in which you point when you pray, the northeast towards Mecca? Towards the stone, isn't there —

0:44:58 Ebrahim Nana: So the original Qibla, the original direction of prayer, was Jerusalem. And then it was changed to this little structure that houses the stone in Makkah.

0:45:14 Debra Schwartz: And the stone being?

0:45:16 Ebrahim Nana: It's just symbolic, it's a stone from probably a comet or asteroid. It's more symbolic, and that's addressed in —

0:45:32 Debra Schwartz: It's a dark stone, and it can't be studied, but it's still there.

0:45:36 Ebrahim Nana: It's still there.

0:45:39 Debra Schwartz: Yes. So you have procured a place for your mosque, and then how many people have you got here? And this is what year exactly?

0:45:51 Ebrahim Nana: 1991.

0:45:52 Debra Schwartz: And you had gone off to pilgrimage?

0:45:55 Ebrahim Nana: Just for one month. So we bought this place and it escrowed, it closed shortly after. One of the things that many people in our community are involved in is the work of evangelicalism. There's a lot of Muslims in America that are not connected to masjids, that have sort of been here 10, 20 years, have no connection. So brothers here would look in the phone books, find people with Muslim names, knock on their doors, go to gas stations with Muslim workers, to taxi stands where there are cabs waiting and there are Muslim cab drivers, so a lot of effort was made.

0:47:06 Debra Schwartz: A lot of reach out.

0:47:07 Ebrahim Nana: It was a reach out.

0:47:09 Debra Schwartz: And engage. How did that go?

0:47:11 Ebrahim Nana: You don't see results overnight. The Prophet sometimes had to visit people 70 times before they came.

0:47:23 Debra Schwartz: Muhammed?

0:47:25 Ebrahim Nana: Muhammed, yeah. So hey, who are we? We're just ordinary people. But slowly the awareness increased and slowly more and more people started coming.

0:47:41 Debra Schwartz: So you started with how many?

0:47:42 Ebrahim Nana: 21.

0:47:43 Debra Schwartz: 21 people.

0:47:44 Ebrahim Nana: Our first Friday we had 21 or 22, I can't remember.

0:47:48 Debra Schwartz: What was like that first Friday in your own place?

0:47:51 Ebrahim Nana: Out of the 22, actually, about eight of us, or even more — I used to have this old Malibu station wagon, and we would gather up eight people in the station wagon. People would be sitting in the back. And we would go to Friday prayers in San Francisco.

0:48:14 Debra Schwartz: Friday prayers in San Francisco because there's —

0:48:17 Ebrahim Nana: There was nothing here.

0:48:18 Debra Schwartz: There was nothing here, but you'd go to which center in the city?

0:48:20 Ebrahim Nana: Islamic Center on Crescent Street. The oldest there.

0:48:24 Debra Schwartz: And you would do that five times a day?

0:48:25 Ebrahim Nana: No, no, no. Just for the Friday prayers.

0:48:27 Debra Schwartz: Just for the Friday.

0:48:28 Ebrahim Nana: Yes, Fridays.

0:48:28 Debra Schwartz: Then the rest of the time you prayed at home?

0:48:30 Ebrahim Nana: Prayed at home, yeah. And then, in '87 we designated one of the rooms at the Travelodge as a prayer room.

0:48:41 Debra Schwartz: Were you reaching out at that point?

0:48:43 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, we were reaching out at that point, too.

0:48:44 Debra Schwartz: So you now have —

0:48:46 Ebrahim Nana: Yes, we're starting to —

0:48:48 Debra Schwartz: Generate interest in that, in a mutual prayer —

0:48:50 Ebrahim Nana: We had gone from, whatever, eight, nine, 10 to 20-plus, and then we moved here. And now we have, I think, over 100. And when we started, this was the first masjid north of the Golden Gate Bridge.

0:49:15 Debra Schwartz: Masjid, I have get used to that word, masjid.

0:49:17 Ebrahim Nana: Yes, masjid, north of the Golden Gate Bridge. People from as far as Santa Rosa would come here for Friday prayers. And then, I think about 10, 15 years later, a masjid opened in Petaluma. So it's a little more convenient for people. We lost people from here that would now be going to Petaluma. Then a masjid opened in Santa Rosa. So in this time period there's —

0:49:54 Debra Schwartz: What time period are we looking at here?

0:49:57 Ebrahim Nana: I take that back. There's also Friday prayers in a space in Novato. And that just started recently. I'm hearing there's now also Friday prayers in Ukiah.

0:50:10 Debra Schwartz: People would come all the way from Ukiah for Friday prayers?

0:50:13 Ebrahim Nana: They never did. I mean, it was too far. So after this was set,

the brothers from here went and started doing evangelical work in Petaluma, and then that was established and they moved to Santa Rosa and Ukiah. And now, I don't know for sure, but even in Eureka there's now prayers.

0:50:39 Debra Schwartz: So your children are basically growing up steeply inculcated in your culture.

0:50:47 Ebrahim Nana: Not really. They were born here, in American schools —

0:50:50 Debra Schwartz: Were they praying and studying, of course? You're getting an influence, or no?

0:50:55 Ebrahim Nana: You're getting an influence. But they were growing up in a very non-Islamic environment.

0:51:05 Debra Schwartz: And how was that for you as parents trying to keep tradition alive?

0:51:11 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, one of the things we worry about the most is children here. The culture here is very dominating. A lot of Muslim kids go away from Islam. It's like any other community — partying, drugs, girls, whatever. So it's a struggle to keep kids on the right path. But one of the things, again, was with this evangelical group, they would go on the path of Allah for a weekend or 40 days now—

0:52:07 Debra Schwartz: Wait, a weekend to 40 days?

0:52:09 Ebrahim Nana: Depending. You could go on a weekend and you would go to some other mosque somewhere else. And it'll basically be like a retreat in whatever mosque. So you're living, staying at that masjid, and then you're going visiting Muslims in that neighborhood to invite them — so one of the safeguards was to try to get our children to go on the path of Allah for the weekend.

0:52:41 Debra Schwartz: Kind of like a missionary?

0:52:43 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. You could go longer, for 40 days. My second son went with a group that went to the Northwest. So they would go to masjids in Eugene, Corvallis, Portland—there's several—Seattle. They do a 40-day loop and just move. So I think that at least saved many of the kids from veering off here.

0:53:20 Debra Schwartz: So do you have people, non-Muslim born people come and join this masjid? Am I saying that right? Say it one more time.

0:53:27 Ebrahim Nana: Masjid. M-A-S-J-I-D. Yeah, so there isn't anymore. My daughter-in-law would have a number here for anyone that wanted to know more of Islam. And she used to have a get-together once a year for —

0:53:51 Debra Schwartz: You're pointing to a —

0:53:52 Ebrahim Nana: No, she's not here anymore.

0:53:53 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, but people that can't see this. You're pointing towards—

0:53:57 Ebrahim Nana: A whiteboard.

0:53:58 Debra Schwartz: A whiteboard over there that has information on it, and that would include people that might be interested.

0:54:03 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, so I was really surprised that there was as many 15 white American women in Marin that have accepted Islam. You hear a lot about Islam being anti-women, and all that, and here's 15 women that, on their own, have accepted Islam.

0:54:31 Debra Schwartz: Do they have anything in common, from Christianity to Islam, or from any other? Is it a variety?

0:54:38 Ebrahim Nana: Oh, I don't know, I have not talked with them. A few had Muslim husbands, but the majority were on their own. Many came, not many, but a few of them came from studying Sufism. So that seemed to have an influence.

0:55:00 Debra Schwartz: You do have — probably hoping I don't bring this up — but you do have one very famous white congregation member.

0:55:10 Ebrahim Nana: That's right: John Walker Lindh.

0:55:11 Debra Schwartz: John Walker Lindh?

0:55:13 Ebrahim Nana: Yes. So our masjid here is probably one of the most photographed, videoed masjid in North America.

0:55:19 Debra Schwartz: Because of John Walker Lindh?

0:55:20 Ebrahim Nana: John Walker Lindh.

0:55:21 Debra Schwartz: For those that don't know about him, that are listening to this recording—they may be perhaps younger — maybe you could illuminate exactly the impact of that name.

0:55:33 Ebrahim Nana: So, we regularly have people coming, and wanting to know more about Islam. They may want a Quran, want some literature, or come and have questions, and then some of them would say, "I want to embrace Islam." So it's a progression. You start out with —

0:56:03 Debra Schwartz: Interest.

0:56:04 Ebrahim Nana: Interest, and then —

0:56:05 Debra Schwartz: You engage, if it's interesting enough for you.

0:56:10 Ebrahim Nana: But John came already convinced.

0:56:12 Debra Schwartz: So he came, maybe you could just talk a little about him, because as I understand he was a friend of your son.

0:56:18 Ebrahim Nana: Yes. But before he was a friend of my son, he came one day and said, "I want to take the declaration of faith."

0:56:28 Debra Schwartz: He's how old here?

0:56:30 Ebrahim Nana: He was about 16 or 17.

0:56:31 Debra Schwartz: And he was born in —

0:56:33 Ebrahim Nana: Fairfax. He's Marin-born, Marin-raised.

0:56:34 Debra Schwartz: Marin-born. White.

0:56:37 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. White, middle-class.

0:56:39 Debra Schwartz: And he knows at a very young age that he wants to.

0:56:42 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, so he had studied Islam on his own. Not going through the normal progression, where I see —

0:56:52 Debra Schwartz: No convincing required.

0:56:53 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. So the media made a ton about it, "This is a really wacko, unusual, weird thing, that this white American accept Islam." But it's really not that unique. Like I said, we have many others come and accept Islam. The only thing unique about him was that he came without any prior connection with us.

0:57:20 Debra Schwartz: With his parents, had they exposed him to Islam, or religious —

0:57:25 Ebrahim Nana: Don't know.

0:57:26 Debra Schwartz: Don't know.

0:57:28 Ebrahim Nana: So he accepted Islam, and then, this evangelist group I keep mentioning, Ijethema, they had a gathering in Santa Clara. And so — this was in the Bay Area — probably 1,000 people there or something, and I told John, “Hey, this is a perfect time to join, come here.” One thing is to study Islam, the other one is to live Islam.

0:58:00 Debra Schwartz: So you’re telling him about this event, this congregation.

0:58:02 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, so actually, I can’t remember, I may have taken him with me.

0:58:08 Debra Schwartz: And this is in Santa Rosa.

0:58:09 Ebrahim Nana: No, it was in Santa Clara.

0:58:10 Debra Schwartz: Santa Clara, excuse me.

0:58:12 Ebrahim Nana: The Santa Clara Fairgrounds, yeah.

0:58:13 Debra Schwartz: Okay.

0:58:14 Debra Schwartz: We rented that hall. And I remember his mother thought he had been kidnapped by some cult, or something [chuckles], and then he became friends with my eldest son. My eldest son had been very rebellious, wouldn’t pray. And then, something happened between the two and they both became—my son became much more righteous, much more practicing.

0:58:56 Debra Schwartz: Do you think that he had an influence on your son?

0:59:00 Ebrahim Nana: On each other. They became close friends. Abdullah and he would talk in the car, but he never came into my house. So, for all the media that has him with me, in two years I probably talked with him less than two hours.

0:59:24 Debra Schwartz: What do you mean there’s media that has — I don’t recall the media. Were there articles and so on that suggested that you had had some kind of unsavory influence on this young man’s mind?

0:59:35 Ebrahim Nana: If you just go and Google in my name, then you’ll see 1,000 articles. So like I said, I initiated him, I gave him his conversion, I took him to Santa Clara. And even then [unintelligible]. Like I said, probably in two years I spent less than two hours with him.

1:00:00 Debra Schwartz: And then, what happened next?

1:00:03 Ebrahim Nana: My son and John both decided that they wanted go study Islam overseas. So Abdullah finished UC Berkeley at 20. He had a lot of AP classes. And when he finished, he said, “Look, I finished two or three years earlier than others, I’m

going to go study Islam somewhere.” I said, “Sure.” And I did research on where he should be going, and I thought the best place for Abdullah would be South Africa. The standard of living is higher there, and the institutions there, the scholars, know English. In fact, the place that Abdullah ended up — out of the 35 scholars, 34 spoke English fluently, as well as their main language. And plus, most of the institutions there are controlled by people from my community in India. So we have a similar language, similar food, similar thought processes, similar standards. Abdullah really, really tried hard for John to go with him to South Africa. But John had other ideas. He ended up in Yemen.

1:01:34 Debra Schwartz: Yemen, Yemen. Fighting?

1:01:36 Ebrahim Nana: No. I remember, he came back after a year and Abdullah and he connected here. And then, from there, from Yemen —

1:01:49 Debra Schwartz: John ended up going to —

1:02:00 Ebrahim Nana: They didn’t connect. Abdullah didn’t connect. And he [Lindh] ended up in Afghanistan from Yemen. So in the year, a year-and-a-half, he went to an Arabic school in Yemen. And from there, whatever influence had happened there, we don’t know.

1:02:15 Debra Schwartz: But the ultimate outcome was —

1:02:19 Ebrahim Nana: That he went to fight for the Taliban. And at that time, the Taliban was not in the bad books of the American government. In fact, the American government had just given the Taliban money for eradicating opium, because intoxicants are not allowed in Islam, and Taliban were — so he went there to fight the Northern Alliance, which is a Communist ideology. So the Taliban were fighting the Northern Alliance, and then 9/11 happened, and suddenly the Taliban that were allies—not allies, or at least, were friendly with the US or friends with the US because they’d just given them a grant — became the enemy. And when you’re in a war zone, you can’t just suddenly say, “Hey, look, hey,” one minute, “Let me grab a cab and then, we get out of here.” It just doesn’t happen that way. So he clearly had not gone there to fight the US; he had gone there to fight the Communists that were against — so these were the remnants of the Communists that the Russians had had when they invaded Afghanistan in 1979. So he was just wrong place at the wrong time. But the media, of course, made a big thing out of it.

1:04:01 Debra Schwartz: Yeah, all the fury and froth post 9/11.

1:04:04 Ebrahim Nana: 9/11, yeah. He was just a foot soldier. That was a very minor—

1:04:12 Debra Schwartz: How was that for you and your family, and your son, specifically, who was friends with him?

1:04:23 Ebrahim Nana: There were challenges, but we got through it. Clearly, we were a lot more under the government's eye. But the good thing about our masjid here is we don't allow political discussions.

1:04:54 Debra Schwartz: So this is not a gathering place where people might start talking about politics, it's simply to pray?

1:05:00 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. So our philosophy has always been, "You want to talk politics, go into the parking lot." So we never have talks on Palestine. It's just any political topic, we've never had it, so I think that made meetings easier for us, too, because this was totally just meant to be a religious place.

1:05:25 Debra Schwartz: And after 9/11, and the general shock and the anger of America, and the issues that it brought up, how was that for your family and your community here?

1:05:41 Ebrahim Nana: I think, for us, it was not that bad. Marin is a very, very liberal community. After 9/11, we actually had neighbors that came and left flowers and fruit on the front door. Neighbors would be on the lookout, "Hey, you see something suspicious." So I think we were very fortunate, we really didn't have any issues. There was just one idiot that used to leave messages on our phone machine. And actually, the kids really enjoyed his messages, listening to him. [chuckles] But that was the only thing. They were bad, but it was comical, the comments he made.

1:06:36 Debra Schwartz: You mean they were just so outrageous that they'd be —

1:06:37 Ebrahim Nana: So outrageous, yeah, yeah.

1:06:39 Debra Schwartz: Wanting to?

1:06:39 Ebrahim Nana: The kids were like, "Hey, what did he say today?" [chuckles] But other than that, we've had no threats, no. Well, I guess this guy, I guess you would call them threats. I once called the sheriff's office on them, and it wasn't worth —

1:07:02 Debra Schwartz: You didn't feel threatened?

1:07:03 Ebrahim Nana: No.

1:07:03 Debra Schwartz: Or your family, or your congregation?

1:07:04 Ebrahim Nana: No.

1:07:06 Debra Schwartz: Did others in your congregation experience any kind of —

1:07:09 Ebrahim Nana: We, of course, experienced more issues traveling. When we

got on flights, we'd get the dreaded 4Ss, Secondary Security Screening. When we came back into this country, we'd go into secondary screening. They would take our phones, our laptops, download, whatever. It was a hassle, but, hey, if we'd done nothing wrong — my only thought many times was that, "Hey, instead of wasting your time on me, go after the really bad guys. Why are you wasting your time on me?"

1:08:00 Debra Schwartz: Are you an American citizen then?

1:08:02 Ebrahim Nana: Finally.

1:08:03 Debra Schwartz: Finally? That took a while, did it?

1:08:09 Ebrahim Nana: A long time. I've had a green card since '76, which means I can legally stay here, but citizenship took a while.

1:08:26 Debra Schwartz: Yes. So, it's awfully sweet that the neighbors brought flowers. Everybody basically was in mourning post-9/11. That was a shocking thing. Did you feel —

1:08:37 Ebrahim Nana: But I think the neighbors realized we had nothing to do with it, and that they felt we were going to get stigmatized. So, I think this community around us is — I think they're happy with us. I don't think we've caused them grief or anything. Once a year or so, we have open house and they come and they see we really don't have any — it's an open house really. [chuckles] There's nothing secretive or evil happening here.

1:09:22 Debra Schwartz: Did you have any FBI or CIA investigation where you —

1:09:28 Ebrahim Nana: Of course.

1:09:28 Debra Schwartz: Of course?

1:09:32 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, let's not get into it. [chuckles] Let's say we got over it.

1:09:40 Debra Schwartz: You got over it? How long did it, what you got over, go on for?

1:09:46 Ebrahim Nana: It took a long time, it took a long time. 10 years, 12 years.

1:09:53 Debra Schwartz: That is a long time.

1:09:55 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:09:57 Debra Schwartz: Yet you don't seem angry about it.

1:10:04 Ebrahim Nana: At the end of it, what — I get security checked, okay. What's

the big deal? The only thing I really hated — so again, the security, I didn't have a problem. But every time they tell me it's random, that's when I would lose it. And I would say, "You and I both know it's not random, so just don't BS me. Hey, do your work, I don't have a problem, but just don't lie to me that it's random. It's not random." But other than that, before I could get my boarding pass, they had to call TSA.

1:10:53 Debra Schwartz: And your family, and your children?

1:10:54 Ebrahim Nana: No, just me.

1:10:55 Debra Schwartz: Just you?

1:10:56 Ebrahim Nana: Just me. The TSA problem was just me. Sometimes it would take an hour before — so when I go and check in, the poor agent that had to deal with me —

1:11:15 Debra Schwartz: And the line behind you?

1:11:17 Ebrahim Nana: That person would be stuck with me because they'd be in a call with TSA.

1:11:25 Debra Schwartz: But not your wife or your brothers, or, you specifically?

1:11:30 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:11:33 Debra Schwartz: Yet you're one of many here.

1:11:35 Ebrahim Nana: Well, I supported — when the media came and asked about John Walker, I supported him, which came with a price.

1:11:49 Debra Schwartz: You paid a price for that support.

1:11:50 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:11:52 Debra Schwartz: I heard that the Mill Valley Police Department were contacted at one point.

1:12:03 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. Mill Valley Police Department say, "Hey, look, this community's been in here for 10 or 15 years. We've never had problems in there. The kids are well-behaved. They don't go on drunken work parties, are well-behaved. They don't drink. We don't have any problems with them. Why would we have any reason to put them under heavier surveillance?"

1:12:34 Debra Schwartz: They said no?

1:12:35 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, this is what we hear. I don't know how true or not true

it is. But, again, from their viewpoint — other communities, there could be domestic issues. There could be violence among each other, or whatever, and we really don't have any.

1:13:00 Debra Schwartz: Have you, in your time here in Mill Valley — you've been here a good long while now, you're a long-term citizen.

1:13:06 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:13:07 Debra Schwartz: Very much inculcated into our community, and California.

1:13:11 Ebrahim Nana: That's right.

1:13:11 Debra Schwartz: And America.

1:13:13 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:13:14 Debra Schwartz: Have you seen changes here, since, in your time here? I always ask.

1:13:18 Ebrahim Nana: Changes in terms of —

1:13:20 Debra Schwartz: Of living here. What your life is like here. What it was like when you arrived, and what your day-to-day, what you may see different now.

1:13:32 Ebrahim Nana: Not really. It's still the same mellow community it was when we moved in here. [chuckles] Maybe it was mellower before. More hippies. If you remember, I don't know how long you've been here, but in Sausalito, there was the hippies living there that would be next to our motel. So it's always been a live and let live community. As Marin becomes less and less affordable, I see a certain type of people moving out and being replaced by more business, more high-level executives.

1:14:28 Debra Schwartz: Does that affect your congregation of people that come? Shaking your head no.

1:14:32 Ebrahim Nana: No.

1:14:33 Debra Schwartz: Not at all?

[pause in recording]

1:14:39 Debra Schwartz: Okay, we are back on now. I was just mentioning, as we've had yet another interruption, of basically one of your family members —

1:14:46 Ebrahim Nana: So we have a very large, extended family living in Mill Valley. We have close to 80 households from my hometown, living within Mill Valley,

Marin City, Corte Madera. And many of us are related, one way or the other. It's levels of relationship. So, most, for the five-time daily prayers, most of the people that come here are from my community in India. We speak the same language. The goal or, since we've been formed 25 years, is that wherever they were, they want to get close to this community. They would be on waiting lists for low-cost housing, for whatever. And the ultimate goal is to be able to live here. The core of our community, the five times daily prayers, are members from out of town. And then that's supplemented. On Friday prayers, we have —

1:16:12 Debra Schwartz: So you have, over time —

1:16:18 Ebrahim Nana: Created —

1:16:19 Debra Schwartz: Without debt or interest —

1:16:21 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah.

1:16:24 Debra Schwartz: Brought so much of your — from Bangkok.

1:16:26 Ebrahim Nana: No, from —

1:16:28 Debra Schwartz: From India.

1:16:31 Ebrahim Nana: So, as I've mentioned, our community was spread out in Asia. Most of them come from our hometown, but many have come from Karachi, Pakistan. During the partition there, in 1947, they had moved to Pakistan. We have one family, or several families, they're from our community, from Singapore, from Burma, South Africa, from England. So, from our community, but that were in other parts of the world that ended up here.

1:17:15 Debra Schwartz: Wow! That's amazing.

1:17:18 Ebrahim Nana: So my four daughter-in-laws, one was born in Saudi Arabia, from our community; the second was born in London, from our community; the third, Canadian citizen, and the fourth was born in Alabama, from our community.

1:17:42 Debra Schwartz: Do you arrange these meetings or do people just come together?

1:17:48 Ebrahim Nana: Matchmaking is centered around our community, hometown community. India has a very different — there's a clear, distinct community, so we come from a community called Sunni Vohra. We claim that we're of Arab descent. Our community claims we're of Arab descent, but it's probably a mixture of some Arab blood and local Indian blood.

1:18:34 Debra Schwartz: But you still have the tradition to have arranged marriages

or — are all of your sons — I see I'm saying this wrong.

1:18:44 Ebrahim Nana: Not arranged, but suggested marriages.

1:18:49 Debra Schwartz: Suggested.

1:18:50 Ebrahim Nana: Suggested. So, for compatibility, if the spouse is from our community, it makes life adjustment and everything easier. But at the same time, there's many that have married other Muslims as well, from other communities. Some have married a couple of Fiji girls, some have married Afghani girls.

1:19:29 Debra Schwartz: So, you've got your large family and relatives and there's linkages in many ways to different areas from all over the world.

1:19:38 Ebrahim Nana: That's right.

1:19:39 Debra Schwartz: And now you're a businessman too in Mill Valley, or in Corte Madera. And your business is?

1:19:48 Ebrahim Nana: We make large glass walls that open, like this one here.

1:19:52 Debra Schwartz: Uh-huh. That's how you have this nice division. And then, you work with your family?

1:19:58 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah, my four brothers, four of us altogether, and we have about 10 in the second generation working with us.

1:20:10 Debra Schwartz: How is that?

1:20:11 Ebrahim Nana: The dynamics? It's fun. [chuckles]

1:20:14 Debra Schwartz: It's fun?

1:20:17 Ebrahim Nana: There's pluses and negatives but, at the end of it, I think the positives outweigh the negatives.

1:20:25 Debra Schwartz: When you think back to being 18 years old, coming from Thailand to California, to UC Berkeley, I still can't imagine what that must have been like. And now you think of yourself today, and the long journey it's been, if you were to be talking to your younger self and saying how things would evolve —

1:20:51 Ebrahim Nana: Where life takes you there's — at the time, there was no indication on what we'd be doing. I had never imagined coming to live in America. I was really happy in Thailand, and you know, when I go back, I often wonder what would have happened if I hadn't been forced to come here. But, at the end of the day, I think we made the right decision. I mean, for our children there's many ways, so monetarily that's

— whether we were in Thailand or here, wouldn't have made that much difference. But in terms of my children, other children, I think it's less difficult to stay on the right path in America than Thailand.

1:22:05 Debra Schwartz: How about your father? The man that brought you here. Where is he?

1:22:12 Ebrahim Nana: So, we live in a complex with six homes.

1:22:16 Debra Schwartz: Here, in the neighborhood?

1:22:16 Ebrahim Nana: Mill Valley, on Seaver Drive.

1:22:19 Debra Schwartz: Where?

1:22:19 Ebrahim Nana: On Seaver. Right behind where Shelter Bay is. My father's 89, my mother passed away two years ago. He comes to prayer five times a day. We have turns to bring him here and that's a — yes, so we're all close to each other.

1:22:49 Debra Schwartz: When did he move here?

1:22:51 Ebrahim Nana: He actually had his green card before I did, as an investor, so he had an investor visa. But, at that time, the reasoning for getting their visa was that — I don't know if you remember, during the Vietnam era there was the "domino theory" that if Vietnam fell then Laos and Cambodia would become communist, and then next would be Thailand. He just wanted an exit strategy if he needed to get out and, eventually, he — if you have a green card, it means you have to come here, live a certain amount of months every year, and gradually he decided it was more comfortable here. For many years, he alternated between here and Thailand. And then, finally, he closed his business in Thailand and moved here permanently.

1:24:03 Debra Schwartz: An investment, a simple investment becomes his future.

1:24:10 Ebrahim Nana: That's right. Like I said, in Thailand we were very comfortable. [chuckles] Most people come to America with very little, then they succeed in America. For us, it was the reverse. We came with money, we blew it on a lot of, I wouldn't say bad investments, but bad decisions. I neglected to mention that in between we were also in the oil exploration business and we lost a lot of money there.

1:24:50 Debra Schwartz: What year is that?

1:24:52 Ebrahim Nana: '90 to — I think the last well we drilled was 2008. But once you get suckered in that business, it's like a gambler being addicted.

1:25:06 Debra Schwartz: Investing in the Middle East or here in —

1:25:09 Ebrahim Nana: Here. Glenn County, here.

1:25:11 Debra Schwartz: Oh, my.

1:25:11 Ebrahim Nana: We were looking for the mother lode.

1:25:15 Debra Schwartz: It was reversed to you. You came well-to-do and —

1:25:21 Ebrahim Nana: And we were — what's the word — we were aggressive in our investment strategies. So over the years I've made a lot of money, and lost a lot of money too. But right now, just one business now, wall systems, and that's it.

1:25:46 Debra Schwartz: A lot of people live here because of the natural beauty. You work, you have your mosque here, you have your family, so much. What parts of this area do you — shaking your head no?

1:26:03 Ebrahim Nana: No, all of it. I love Marin County. I love nature — when I wake up in the morning and I see the mist in the clouds. When I vacationed in India, my uncle would take me to these mountains, “Oh, look at this mist, and look at how romantic this is.” And I see that every day. I see deer in my backyard. It's beautiful. I really enjoy Marin. I sit on some beaches there. We go early before the crowds and listen to the waves. There's waterfalls. There's a waterfall behind Dominican. Have you ever been there? It just happens when it's — every rain. I know Marin in and out, it's a beautiful place. The weather is perfect. And many things here we take for granted until someone points it out to you. Like we have no flies or mosquitoes, basically. And we try anywhere else in the world, we get so used to living without that, we don't even realize that, “Hey, that's something special that we don't have bugs.”

1:27:25 Debra Schwartz: So you're a California guy now?

1:27:26 Ebrahim Nana: California guy, yeah. And everything in between. If you want to go to the snow you go two, three hours, you're in snow. The only negative I have here is the earthquake. It's going to happen. [chuckles] Not if, it's just when. Other than that, life is good here.

1:28:00 Debra Schwartz: We're getting ready to close up here, but I have a couple questions for you.

1:28:04 Ebrahim Nana: Sure.

1:28:05 Debra Schwartz: When you think about the scope of your life and what matters to you, personally, the ideology that guides you — you talk about your prayers and your relationship with God — what do you say to your children, to the people in the congregation about enduring even the obstacles that you've had to face merely because who you are, and everybody faces something because of who they are, but how do you get through it? How do you manage? You're older now, you're 65, you've been around,

you've seen a lot, you've been a lot of places, you think about —

1:29:00 Ebrahim Nana: I think you have to look at life in balance, in the context or all things. Yes, there's been issues but in balance it's been a good life here. It's peaceful, it's — I had some Iranian friends, that when a child goes out to go to school or something, one doesn't know even that he's going to come back or not.

1:29:39 Debra Schwartz: These are your friends where?

1:29:40 Ebrahim Nana: Some friends from Iran had related this to me. And we don't live like that. Basically, the only thing we worry about is the kid might get wet if it rains from school or something. It's really a very comfortable life. So, I would say, "Hey, count your blessings that you're growing up in a beautiful place, you're living in a beautiful place, good people around you, people that are friendly, understanding." And I guess one should give back to the community, but I'm not, I'm not giving anything back, but —

1:30:27 Debra Schwartz: You think you're not giving anything back?

1:30:32 Ebrahim Nana: No, I don't know, not to Mill Valley. I pay my taxes and I employ a lot of people, I guess, other than that I'm not really — I'm not serving on the Design Review Board or — I'm not doing any of that. As a Muslim, the biggest satisfaction I have is that my children are all rightly guided. My oldest son is a Mufti.

1:31:14 Debra Schwartz: What is a Mufti?

1:31:16 Ebrahim Nana: Mufti, he's an Islamic scholar that actually can give rulings.

1:31:21 Debra Schwartz: What does that mean, to give rulings?

1:31:22 Ebrahim Nana: Suppose somebody asks you, a scholar, someone asks a question about whatever, an example, "Hey, is it possible for a human to be on the moon? Is that something one can believe or not, right?" So the first thing would be to look in the Quran and say, "Hey, is there anything about that or not? Man can go outside Earth or —" If the answer is not in the Quran, if it's so specific, then you would look at the sayings of the Prophet. Did the Prophet ever talk about this topic or not? And if the Prophet didn't either, then the next level would be the consensus of scholars. So people that have studied that, based on their understanding of the Quran, the Hadees, and some of them getting together, "Yes, this can be believed or not." A Mufti would be part of that consensus, so he's at that level.

1:32:52 Debra Schwartz: He's such a scholar of the Quran that he —

1:32:55 Ebrahim Nana: That he is allowed to give rulings.

1:33:02 Debra Schwartz: Is that a very —

1:33:03 Ebrahim Nana: Rare. So out of his graduating class of 55, only one or two, I think only two, were invited to continue.

1:33:12 Debra Schwartz: Can he, basically, recite it from memory?

1:33:16 Ebrahim Nana: He does not know the Quran by heart. Our fourth son does, but he understands Arabic fluently. He's got three rooms here full of his books. He has more Islamic books than — probably one of the best collection. But two things that make him different than other Muftis is that he has a Bachelor's degree in Business.

1:33:47 Debra Schwartz: UC Berkeley?

1:33:48 Ebrahim Nana: UC Berkeley. So, many questions related to finance come to him because he has a grasp of both. Many of the scholars that came from the Middle East haven't gone through a similar type of education. So he gets a lot of those type of questions. And secondly, because he's American-born, he has a huge following of younger Muslims.

1:34:28 Debra Schwartz: American-born Muslims?

1:34:29 Ebrahim Nana: American Muslims. If a young Muslim is having some issues with his girlfriend, for example, he goes to a scholar. "Oh, Haram, you're not supposed to have a girlfriend, what are you doing? It's not allowed." It's like, Abdullah has grown up here, so he's a lot more approachable to the younger generation. Most of his contacts, or people asking him for advice, are younger people.

1:35:07 Debra Schwartz: So I guess, I'm sort of getting, and correct me if I'm wrong, that raising your children in such a very different environment from the one you came from, knowing that they have continued in the tradition that you raised them in is —

1:35:19 Ebrahim Nana: Is very important. It's probably the most important. That's why I said in Thailand, I don't think that would have happened. If you've been to Bangkok —

1:35:29 Debra Schwartz: I have, yes.

1:35:31 Ebrahim Nana: Every other corner has a massage parlor. It's just brothels and drugs.

1:35:40 Debra Schwartz: It's a chaotic place.

1:35:42 Ebrahim Nana: Especially if you have money. A little money can go a long ways to the wrong things. So I think in those terms it was the right decision.

1:35:55 Debra Schwartz: Is there anything we haven't talked about today that you

would like to add?

1:36:10 Ebrahim Nana: I would encourage others to at least make an attempt to better understand Islam than what's portrayed in the media. The media shows Islam and Muslims in a very negative light, when in reality it's not like that. Muslims and Christians and Jews have coexisted together for 1,400 years. Other than the last 20, 30 years there have been Christian communities in Muslim lands that's lived 1,000 years. So anything in the media that's portraying it as a battle of civilizations, all that is simply untrue. One just needs to go and look at history past that. Even when the Jews got kicked out of — in the Middle Ages when they got kicked out of Europe, where did they go? They mostly went to Muslim lands. So I would encourage others to study history and look at the relationships in the past, and just not look at the current [moment] where some idiots with Muslim names have hijacked the Muslim narrative and then the media has stereotyped us. Like I said, here, white American women are coming to Islam here. It's not like we're going out there, "Hey!" passing out literature or anything. It's like they're seeking us out on their own. So, I'm not saying promote Islam but at least get an understanding of who we are.

1:38:35 Debra Schwartz: Well, as I understand it, the Quran is poetry. Evocative, beautifully worded, where words have such — at the time of Muhammad and that — maybe I'm misspeaking, but maybe you can speak to the significance —

1:38:55 Ebrahim Nana: We believe the Quran is Allah's word. So we do believe it was written by God.

1:39:01 Debra Schwartz: Can you say that again?

1:39:01 Ebrahim Nana: It was not written by any humans. It's the word of God.

1:39:05 Debra Schwartz: Word of God?

1:39:06 Ebrahim Nana: Yeah. We believe the Quran is miraculous in many ways. Miraculous in the historical facts, in their foretelling the future, in scientific facts that are mentioned in there, and miraculous in the quality of its literary style, the prose and the poetry. But the most important way we believe it's miraculous is that we believe it has not been changed. So if you look at the oldest Quran you can find in Arabic 1,400 years ago and the latest one, you'll find it's identical. And in fact, we have, what? 10 little boys from five or six to 12, 13, every night, they're memorizing the Quran. Here in Mill Valley. American born, American raised, going to American schools, memorizing the Quran. And we respect the earlier revelations just as much as we respect the Quran — with the Quran, we would not put it a lower place. We would not put the Old Testament or the New Testament below us. Judaism is probably the closest other religion to Islam: we don't eat pork; women are covered in the Orthodox Jews; the meat that's eaten. When I first came to this country, the only meat I got was from an Orthodox Jewish butcher on Foothill Boulevard in Oakland, because we can eat the meat of the Orthodox Jews.

1:41:06 Debra Schwarz: It's been blessed.

1:41:07 Ebrahim Nana: It's been killed, the animal's been bled. So I want to really look at the closeness between the religions, rather than look at the differences.

1:41:20 Debra Schwartz: Difference, but maybe not so much after all.

1:41:23 Ebrahim Nana: No, not so much after all. Yeah.

1:41:25 Debra Schwartz: When you take a good look.

1:41:26 Ebrahim Nana: That's right.

1:41:27 Debra Schwartz: I very much appreciate you allowing us a look into your life and your experience, Ebrahim.

1:41:34 Ebrahim Nana: Well thank you, Debra, for being patient with me. [chuckles]

1:41:37 Debra Schwartz: Thank you for being patient with me. On behalf of the Mill Valley Library and the Mill Valley Historical Society, thank you so much for your time and your story and for sharing this space for us to see.

1:41:49 Ebrahim Nana: You're welcome.

1:41:50 Debra Schwartz: And I hope I see you again soon.

1:41:52 Ebrahim Schwartz: Sure. I'm here around.

1:41:53 Debra Schwartz: Perhaps not to come to pray.

1:41:56 Ebrahim Nana: Sure, yeah.

1:41:57 Debra Schwartz: Thank you.

1:41:58 Ebrahim Nana: Thank you.