

Husein Interview

Nigel: Hello

Husein: How are you doing, Nigel?

Nigel: GOOD

Husein: GOOD.

Nigel: Today is my first interview for my new nonprofit, See Beyond My Skin and I am here with Husein Noorani. I met Husein at Project Learn School in the Germantown section of Philadelphia. Husein was my teacher for 4th and 5th grade and during that time I became his friend. Husein is a teacher, a husband, and a father of three young children. My goal with See Beyond My Skin is to help others see people of color the same way they see themselves. Husein, I would love to share your story with our listeners.

Husein: I am excited to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

Nigel: When was the first time you experienced racism?

Husein: You know I have experienced racism quite a few times in my life and I think part of it has to do with what I look like, being a person of color, and also my name- it throws people off. My name is Husein Sultan Alee Noorani. I think for a lot of adults it takes them back a little when they hear my name is Husein, but my first experience with racism that I remember was in elementary school at the lunch table. I was sitting with a few kids and I was in sixth grade. You start having crushes in sixth grade and I was thinking about girls- how I looked or how they perceived me. One of my friends sitting next to me was a girl and she was talking to other people at the table. I remember kind of listening in and she was talking about who she likes and who she didn't like and I remember her saying, "I could never like someone who was Indian." I just remember thinking well I'm Indian, why wouldn't you like someone who was Indian? I know this wasn't like overt racism but I remember it kinda being the launching pad where I started feeling different. Like, wait, what is different about being Indian? What is wrong with being Indian or why wouldn't someone like someone who was Indian or be attracted to someone who was Indian? So that was just a really interesting moment for me to realize, maybe there is something different about me. So yeah, that was a really unique experience of a young person. At that time I really didn't have anyone to talk to about it. I just kind of kept it to myself but I remember feeling really awkward and strange and being unable to process it.

Nigel: Wow, that must feel pretty bad to have your own friend kind of backstab you.

Husein: Yeah, it was difficult. We build relationships throughout our lives and they are all built on trust. We want to feel safe and loved and even at a young age we tend to gravitate to people who we feel are similar to us, or that we get along with, or are inspired by. And I just feel like

that safety net that I had with my friend in that moment dissolved but at the same time, I still wanted to be friends with them, I just didn't understand why they were saying such a thing. That was hard for me to understand. Why would someone have that kind of thought about someone based on their identity- it was who I am, right? That was difficult. Wait, you don't like people like me? That was hard. But that was the start, and beyond that, throughout my life, I experienced racism in different ways.

Nigel: What was another experience of racism that you remember?

Husein: I think another important time in my life was in jr high school after the Gulf War with Sudam Husein, that was the start of having to give excuses to people, or explain myself to people. "Hey, I'm ok, I'm like a good guy." The US had gone to war with Sudam Husein and that had finished up but Sadam Husein was this infamous name in America and my first name was Husein so when you meet people for the first time they are like "Oh, like Sadam?" That still happens today and it is 2021. Why not, "Oh, like Barack Hussein Obama?" No. The first thing is Sadam Hussein and that still happens today. I remember jr high school was when I really had to explain myself to people. "Oh yeah, but I'm not that religious," or "Oh, I am a good person, my parents are awesome people." I didn't know how to navigate who I was so I would make excuses, "I'm a good person, my parents are great. They are so generous and loving." Which if you think about it, that is a really weird thing to say to someone. But it was me trying to explain that I am not Sadam Hussein. I'm a good person, from a good family. And I remember even friends who knew me having to stand up and say, "No he's a good guy, he's cool, leave him alone." You know, at times when maybe there was tension, that could be sensed by my friends when meeting others. So it is really a strange way to perceive the world and how they are looking at you at a young age. I wasn't able to understand why this was happening. I just thought it was normal actually, for me, but I did recognize that other people didn't have to do that.

Nigel: It must be hard to feel like you have to make an excuse for who you are.

Husein: Yeah, that has always been something that was difficult. There came a time when I started pushing back. I tried to stop explaining and that can get you in trouble too. When someone is being racist towards you or maybe just doesn't understand you, you let them know that you are ok, everything is going to be ok. Instead of doing that, when I got to college I started doing the opposite which was like, "Do you have a problem with who I am and if you do like what's up? Are you going to do something about it?" I think that attitude is dangerous but I think that came out of me at that time because of exhaustion. I was tired of explaining myself. And I can remember countless times where there were definitely arguments with strangers or near fist fights with people because of who I was. At a party for example, if I was introducing myself to people and someone said something racist or derogatory towards Muslims or people like me, instead of me being quiet about it or pretending like I'm the good guy, representing that race, or culture, I pushed back and that would create some tough situations sometimes.

Nigel: You were angry.

Husein: yeah, I was angry, I was exhausted. There was a moment in college where I was at a party, talking to people and after I introduced myself someone told me to go kill some more Kurds. And you know the Kurdish people were attacked and marginalized by Saddam Hussein, and I have nothing to do with that. My name just happens to be Husein. And actually, I am not even from the middle east. Or Iraq. I'm from a totally different place. And for you to lump me into that mess is just totally unfair but instead of speaking and explaining myself, like I used to, I would just come back with some swear words and "Let's Go! I'm ready to fight." That doesn't unfortunately solve anything. It just makes things worse for everybody including my friends who were there and know and love me. Yeah, that happened, and it happened more than once. Even for a candlelight vigil for September 11th. When September 11th happened, I was in college and we had a candlelight vigil on the sidewalk. My friends and I had organized it and someone came by and tried to pick a fight because we were brown. They were at first respectful and then they started asking questions almost like interrogating us. And I said, "Hey, we are upset that this happened and we are Americans, born here. This is a tragedy. It is horrific." But we were all of the sudden outsiders at our own candlelight vigil. We were not American anymore. That person had to be held back by their friends because they went into fight mode to fight us because we have Arabic names. It was pretty tragic.

Nigel: Aw that's hard.

Husein: I've had people in my life give me advice on how to deal with that and it has really changed my life.

Nigel: What was the advice they gave you?

Husein: There are two really important people, or pieces of advice that I received and one was from a friend, his name was Ibrahim and the other was from my father. In college, Ibrahim and I were riding bikes home from lunch or maybe to the quad, I don't know, a couple of guys started yelling "Go back to where you came from!" and Ibrahim has a beard, he is a devote Muslim and I, on the other hand, am kind of a rebel. You can't tell, right? Anyway these guys are yelling at us to go back to where we came from and I quickly turn around on my bike and threw it on the ground and put my hands up in the air and was like "Lets go!"

And Ibrahim looks at me and says, "Hey, what are you doing?" I told him, "You can't let them make fun of us, you can't let them say these things."

And he just looked at me and said, "Husein Bai," which means Brother Husein, "what good is going to happen from this? Let it go. You are not going to teach them anything by doing this. Let's just ride home." That was pretty amazing. I don't have a beard, I don't practice Islam regularly, I'm not like a great Muslim. I don't wear Islamic garb or clothing, and he does. He is living it every day. Muslims look all kind of different ways, there is no right or wrong way to be a Muslim, but he looks Muslim, he is the face of Islam when he is out there. People look at him and know that is a Muslim guy from his appearance. And his way of dealing with the world is- you can't fix everything in the moment, you just have to be a good person. And I remember him

telling me that later. Just be a good person and people will understand later. That is the only way you can reach people.

I remember that my father gave me the same advice. He told me, "Husein, there are going to be times in your life where people are not going to like you because of your name. And who you are," and he said, "And your job is to just be the best person you can be and then they will begin to understand who you are. You can not fault them for being racist and for not understanding who you are because they have limited experience with people like you so you need to give them a positive experience." That was really mind-blowing because, here was my dad, who immigrated here from Zanzibar in 1978 with \$200 in his pocket and with my mom. They faced a lot of racism when they came to this country. There was a story where they were being chased by some teenagers in their car and my dad pulled over in a parking lot and he had a bat and tried to scare them because he had two young kids in the car. So they faced a lot of racism but here he is telling me you can't hate people for not understanding you or for being racist. He gave them an out. It is based on their experience and they have not experienced people like you. The ideas from both of those lessons- from Ibrahim telling me to just be the best person you can be and from my dad saying that they just don't have the experience of people who are different was really mind blowing for me because it made me have some empathy for people who are racist which sounds bizarre but I kind of get that. When I don't understand something I might jump to conclusions and act ignorant or say strange things that don't make sense and a lot of understanding about the world and who you are. You have to give people the benefit of the doubt. And sometimes it's a good experience. I think being the best person that I can be and allowing people to experience me in a positive way is the best way I can explain who I am.

Nigel: How did these experiences affect the names you choose to give your children?

Husein: Yeah, you know that is really a good question.

I married someone who's not of the same background as me. My wife Carly is a caucasian woman the grand-daughter of a presbyterian minister. Carly understands me. She gets it and she understands what I have endured in terms of the way I have perceived the world and the way I perceive race and how it impacts me in my daily life. She gets it because she has to deal with it sometimes and she sees the ugly side of how I can be treated differently in different situations. And so it was really important to both of us to make sure that our kids have an understanding of who they are. We really wanted them to not be shielded from parts of their identity that could be lost. The names of my children are Hafis, that is my oldest son, LuLua, that is my middle child, and Safa, the youngest. Their names are Arabic names and it will always tie them back to their identity and where they came from. We live in a world where we always ask, "where are you from?" And I want them to have an answer for that question. And when they answer that question, I hope that they feel proud of their identity, of their cultural background. And hopefully we can cultivate and develop that for them over time so that they have a good answer and that they feel proud of themselves. I truly believe that it is important to have these conversations. I think a lot of people steer away from them. We are in a time where there is so much sensitivity that people are afraid to have hard or difficult conversations

because we are afraid of insulting each other. But I really appreciate when someone asks where are you from? I appreciate it because it is a good question and it is important. I used to not appreciate it as much when I had my guard up and when I was exhausted but I think it is important because it allows others to really appreciate differences. If someone asks me where I'm from, I think their intention is to get to know more about me. And that's how I want to be able to perceive the world. I want my kids to be able to perceive the world that way too. And if their intention is to get to know more about me, hopefully I know enough about myself to explain that. And my first response is always, "I was born in Chicago. And my parents are from Zanzibar and there is a really cool story of how they got here." And I think It's having those tough conversations and being willing to be open is really important instead of being like, "ugh I have to answer this question again." I know it's exhausting, but if there is a way to embrace those questions, I want to figure that out. And I want my kids to be able to figure it out. Maybe there is a good intention here. This person is being brave enough to ask me because they're probably really curious. So let's answer it for them. And I know it's like why does another brown person or POC have to explain themselves. But I think it's...I don't know...I just feel like I'd rather have those conversations than ignore them. I just feel like more good can come out of it than bad. It's work. Right?

Nigel: Speak of identity and things like that. You told me once that your wife, Carly, was like your American flag. Can you elaborate on that more.

Husein: Yeah. She's like my pass to get in or out of certain situations. It's a way of life...after being married to her for 7 years or so, she's like my pass into certain circles. And I think people perceive me differently because she's my accessory now or I am hers. It's automatically like he must be okay. He has a white wife. So yeah, she's like my path to citizenship. (*laughs*) even though I was born in this country. Yeah, Carly. It's interesting. We'll be in certain situations and I'll tell her, if I was alone in this situation right now, I think people would be like "oh look at that, another immigrant doing something weird in our country." People would have a different feeling or emotion towards whatever was happening. An example of that is when we were outside a grocery store with our kids. The kids were melting down and really hungry and throwing tantrums. We had just come back from the YMCA and ran out of snacks. So we pulled up to a grocery store, bought a bunch of snacks, and sat outside on the sidewalk in front of the grocery store eating. And like you know the kids were eating snacks but my oldest son wanted a rotisserie chicken so we had a rotisserie chicken and all these snacks and we're eating off a piece of cardboard that we pulled out of the car for a tablecloth. We're just sitting out on the sidewalk and eating. I just looked at Carly and was like, if you weren't here right now, people would be giving us such a glare. Here is this Indian guy or Arab-looking Middle Eastern guy sitting here with his three kids eating off a piece of cardboard outside of a grocery store. It just didn't look right. But having her there, this brunette with blueish-green eyes, sitting there with us made it feel okay. People actually walked by and smiled and greeted us and "Oh you having a good snack". Things like that. I just felt, wow this would've been a totally different experience if she weren't sitting here. She makes certain situations really easy. So that's just one example. There are other situations where I say, I don't feel comfortable and I need you to go handle this. And she'll go and take care of something from me. Just so I don't have to deal with it.

Nigel: When you got married, you had two weddings, one traditional wedding to represent your culture and another wedding that was more your style. Do you have a hard time code switching?

Husein: Yeah, you know I think growing up in America with immigrant parents was hard. At least it was for me. Because here I am growing up with two identities and two different experiences. My experience at home and at the mosque and then my experience at school with friends. It is hard to code switch. And I think over time, I kind of gravitated toward where I felt like my identity was. It just happened organically over time. But I always felt like I was between two different places. Like I had to choose. I always felt like an outsider in both worlds. I could say at this moment in my life, as an adult, I feel accepted everywhere. Between my family, my parents, my mosque, but also with the other parts of my life. So I think part of it is maturing, being able to reflect more, and not being so impulsive, emotionally. As an adult I feel code switching is more natural. So it's easier to just fit in both places. And also feel like I can fit into different compartments of my life more easily. I think part of that is just being an adult, learning how to navigate different situations and not being as impulsive as I used to be or taking things personally. Yeah, having those two weddings was really important. It was important for Carly and I to acknowledge who we were and where we came from. And it was really important to Carly. She really wanted to have a Muslim style wedding because it was important to her to do that not only because she appreciates my background, but she also really loves my parents and wanted to make sure that they have the experience that they've always wanted for their children. And that was for us to be married in a mosque and to have this more traditional wedding. So yeah there is a lot of flexibility involved. And emotional maturity.

Nigel: And the last question is, how do you fear yourself being perceived?

Husein: Often times I feel like an imposter. I'm not always sure how I'm being perceived. I feel like I need to take a step back or have a moment of quiet to reflect on what's happening around me. Sometimes I do feel like I'm being perceived in the wrong way, especially with strangers. Like being perceived as someone not from America or maybe someone who is a terrorist or something like that. I always feel that. I don't know if that's in my own head that I'm feeling that fear of being perceived that way. Because over time, my experience is of racism. So I don't know if that's my own perception of self or how people are seeing me. But yeah, I fear that. I'm being perceived as too religious or as a terrorist. And it's sad that those two would go hand in hand. Or perceived as an immigrant. Perceived as someone who doesn't understand American culture. Perceived as someone who might be conservative when in fact if you get to know me, there is a lot that is probably similar...similarities that I have to the Average Joe. That fear sometimes drives me to exaggerate aspects of myself when I first meet people. And I think that happens the way I come off initially to people. It's like a natural mechanism because I have had that perception of being perceived differently. I have a lot of hope at the same time for the future because I've seen people change over time. People are really good at the end of the day.

Everybody just wants to feel loved. People are good. I think my dad's right. If we're experiencing hate or being perceived differently, we're always going to have some fear. And others are maybe being racist based on their experience because they don't know that many POC, they don't know that many Black people or Asians or Indians or people who are just different. They could be racist or say things that are offensive based on their experience. But the minute they know someone who is of a different race or who is gay or whatever, those fences come down. Often.. And that's something that I've learned over time by my experiences. So I'm really hopeful the more we have tough conversations, the more that we open up about identity and who we are, it's exposure. Folks living in small towns. Folks living in the inner city. Folks living in the suburb. All get to know each other. And know different people who are different. Economically, racially, culturally, religion. The more we get to have these conversations and see each other as human beings. I'm hopeful that life is just going to get better. And the way I perceive myself will only get better over time. I'm really hopeful and excited for my kids to be proud of who they are. And their identity and their names as they grow up. I think the world is just going to become a better place. Or at least there is some hope for that.

Nigel: Okay I have one last question. Do you feel at any point in your life you overcorrected yourself on either of the beliefs that you have had. Like maybe going too far on something when you were being too defensive or not having a good boundary if you're trying to be too nice to someone ...

Husein: Like they didn't deserve it almost. Like I went way too far.

Nigel: yeah

Husein: Yeah. I definitely have. As a teacher sometimes, you have gatherings outside of school. Actually in in-school and out of school gathering where I was insulted by someone on the staff. They were taking down names. And I was just new. It was my first day on the job. We were all gathering in the library. They're taking down names. To do parking assignments for cars in the parking lot. They made a comment about my name being like...they equated it to Saddam Husein. "Oh Husein. I was wondering who that is. Who has that strange name like Saddam." Something like that they said. I just said "whatever, let it go". I was just like yeah, hahaha, and played it off cool. Didn't make a big deal about it. But later on when we teachers get together outside of school, the same person made a comment, "I thought you were just another sand-nigger." And I was like, sand nigger? That's a first. I've never been called that. Here I am in a semi-professional setting. Yeah we're not in the school building, but for someone to say that. I just kind of played it cool. I played it off. That would be an example of just trying to fit in still. Even though that was a very threatening situation. And now I'm like...most people wouldn't tolerate that. But it was like, this is a new job, a really great place, I don't want to screw it up. But yeah that was super offensive and not okay. But I just kind of laughed it off and just moved on.

Nigel: wow. Thanks for being so open and honest. I'm lucky to be your friend.

Husein: Thanks so much for having me on Nigel. Yeah these are some really deep questions you've asked me. I'm excited to reflect on this beyond this conversation. I'm really excited about the journey that my children are going to take. And I'm excited for the world they're going to live in. Because I think it's going to be a lot better. It's always getting better. Having these tough conversations, like the questions you asked me in the interview today, and being able to share that is really important. So thanks so much for having me.

Nigel: Thank you. Thanks so much for being on.

Husein: You know...I feel like I can add one more thing in regard to the person who said "I thought you were just another sand nigger." I let it kind of roll off and I laughed and I said "oh like you're just another Jewish American Princess." And I remember afterwards feeling horrible for saying that, and just feeling like, why did I do that? Why did I stoop down to that level? But it was like, that was me being exhausted. So I don't know. I think that's important to include. But maybe not. Even later on, I remember talking to Carly about that and she was like "who cares that you said that? You should've said something" and I was like yeah but it felt dirty to say that. It didn't feel good.

H: But I remember saying that. I remember being so angry. It wasn't just laughing at it. It was also like "what the heck." So my response was I laughed to try and let it go. And I just remember feeling so small and defenseless. Just feeling dirty to be part of all of that. That conversation. It's very real.

Feeling like you have to be perfect in that moment. And I wasn't. I felt guilty about not handling that situation better. And that's hard. I remember afterwards buying that person a drink because I just felt so overwhelmed emotionally. I wanted to make everything okay. When I had done nothing wrong. I wanted that person to like me. So I think that over correcting is what you mean. I remember going that far. Even to buy that person a drink to make it feel like we're friends. Or like this is going to be okay. You can trust me. I'm a good person.

Nigel: It's almost like you came full circle.

H: yeah but beyond full circle. Overcompensating. Over correcting like you said. Trying to be perceived so positively that I go so far as to buy the person a drink who was saying something racist. Going so far as to "here let me spend my money on you please accept me. I'm okay. I'm a good person". Let me buy you something. I went that far. And I think part of it is because I felt I had made a mistake because I made that comment. "Oh you're like a Jewish American princess." I felt bad inside. Oh I should've handled this situation differently. It will make everything okay. We're going to become friends. But that's not...it is strange. I still think about that. I know my kids are going to have to make those decisions but I hope it becomes less frequent.

Nigel: Husein, I can tell you, that you ARE a good person and you are a good friend and a great role model for me and I am lucky to know you. Thanks for your time and thanks for sharing part of your story.

That was Husein Sultan Alee Noorani, my good friend, and first interview for the See Beyond My Skin Podcast. Stay strong, stay true to your story.