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Rita

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TSOS

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Rita: She was, I want to name you Marie and dad was like ,‘Well, you’ve been here nine months, you have the right to - I have the right to - name whomever you want.’ So, his name is A--.

Camera man: If you could just do me a favour and clap your hands, it’ll help us sync up all the cameras.

Interviewer: Are you ready to begin?

Rita: Yeah. Just one thing, I’m kinda sometimes emotional person, so I’ll cry so just... we all do.

Interviewer: Yes, our stories just mean so much to us. It’s who we are so that just fine. You grew up in Baghdad. Tell us what your life was like there.

Rita: I’m born in 1977 and from my mother and father. My mother is Kurdish that’s a different kind of culture. My dad is Iraqi Arabic and mama, Kurdish Iranian. I was happy. I born in Baghdad but I lived in an area, I don’t know if you ever heard of it or maybe in the news ... it’s called Saddam City, before when Saddam was there and then become this other city after he left.

It’s a very common, they call it the common areas, people are, they’re not very wealthy. It’s a poor area. But actually, I was a very happy child. I had fun growing up there. It’s small houses, small alleys but I was, I remember always I am outside, playing outside. I don’t remember ever I was in the house. Mostly outside, and the rules was: ok, you can be outside; anytime we come out, we can see you; you cannot be in any houses anywhere far away, you can play as much as you want to, but be like when we can see you outside. Um, I remember stayed until the night outside and played outside, and just have fun being a child there.

With the war, of course in the 1980s, the war was there, I grow up seeing where people have their dads or uncles die and bring they bring their ashes or their remains to the house and I can see that, sometimes I wake up and there people crying in the middle of the night and see who lost who and it was hard but I don’t remember like I felt anything not normal, even in that period in the 1980s when the war was there and my dad was a soldier in the Iraqi army and I don’t remember I ever - I used to sometimes wake up in the morning and see that he’s there. He comes for two or three days, sometimes one day ... as a soldier... but I don’t remember ever having the urge to worry about him not being there. I know that he will always be there. Until one day I remember, we never had this relationship with my dad, we did never liked him, I always tell him that, ‘I did not like you’. He’s hard, he’s a very hard person, but it’s funny, I remember when I came from school and all the kids came and was like, ‘Hey, your dad is dead!’ and I was like, ‘Oh my god, that’s the best day of my life!’. It was great, I was so happy, he’s gone, he’s done. I came to my mum and said, ‘Mum, is it true my dad is dead?’ And she took the slippers or shoes or whatever was there in her hand and she threw it and said, ‘Don’t say that!’ And I think because he never passed there and to have that figure when he comes home, all the complaints from my grandma, from my aunts: ‘They did this, they did that’, so he has to be hard on us. I think this was one of the things that we did not like and we did not appreciate but when my mum passed away,

when I was 15, we started to ... he become my best friend, until today. So, he's the one I go to. Having him was a great blessing, yeah.

Interviewer: So, your dad was in the military?

Rita: Yeah. In 1985 he got injured, so one leg is shorter than the other. He spent six months in the hospital. We did not know if he is going to make it or not. He has tonnes of surgeries and all kind of things, but he made it. Otherwise I will not have a dad or a mum (unintelligible). So, God is like, 'OK, I'll take one. You have one. One is for me and one for you.'

Interviewer: You said that when you were young, there were people who were being injured, the war was going on, but it didn't really affect you, personally it was a normal part of life. When did that change for you?

Rita: I guess we did not see it much, because as a child, you don't put things together, you don't connect stuff together, you just want to play, you just want to have fun. Crises and tragedies does not mean anything to you. It's like, until you start to grow up and when you lose the first time someone, this is when it hits you. It's like, 'Oh my God. That's real. This person is not there anymore (breaks into tears).'

Interviewer: And when you lost your mum, is that when you experienced that for the first time?

Rita: Yeah, it was (cries). And it was hard, it's hard for her because ... sorry, in the 80s, being in Iraq as a Kurdish Iranian, it's not appreciated because you are not Iraqi, so they come, they start to take people from their houses and just threw them on the borders. And one of the things my mother was very afraid of was, they will take her and just leave us as a family.

So, I remember waking up most of time around, sometimes in the early mornings or in the nights when people knocking on the door very hard, just coming to make sure that ... you know the people loved my family, so they tried to protect them from leaving and these events was very hard. It shook my mum and my aunt to the point ... my mum had cancer, my aunt become crazy. She was... I remember as a child her screaming, 'Ok don't say anything, they are here now. Don't burn down Saddam Hussein's name.' They have all these microphones in the house and they harassed her, the work, and everywhere until she couldn't take it anymore and she just folded and... become not the same person. That's when we... she was alive for a long time but we lost her, we lost the person who was inside, who was a great person.

But yeah, it is when you lose a person, that's when it hits you. And then you start to lose other people in your life and it's like, 'Ok, yeah now I relate, now I understand what's going on there.'

Then when you start to have, in 2003, when you have all these explosions, you have friends and family who lost two or three kids or a whole family in the explosion. The first one it's hard, but after that you start to... they say 'Oh there was some explosion in some place!' And the thing that you think about in the first minute is to call everyone in your family: 'Are you ok? Are you ok? Are you ok?' And then within ten minutes it's a normal life, you know? The road would be closed, everything will be taken, within two or three days the roads are all open and life will go on. This is when I

always make fun with dad and when he's like, 'You will not miss me?' I was like, 'No, two or three days will be... that's it.'

I guess it's one of those things... because you start to mourn people daily or weekly or monthly until the time... In Iraq we have a tradition when we lose someone we wear black for a year or six months or two years or three years and to a point where people lose people and I don't remember my grandma ever in a colourful dresses. It's always black, it's always blue. Cause by the time she take the black, someone dies and she wears that and someone dies and she wears that. So it become, I think, black become the national colour in Iraq. It's like, that's what we wear all the time, yeah.

Interviewer: When did you realise that you needed to leave your home?

Rita: In 2003. I graduated in 1999, I have a Bachelor degree in chemistry. I never thought I will leave Iraq. All my dream, all my hopes are like, I will get married, have kids, work, be with my siblings, we'll come every Thursday and Friday to be with my dad and with our kids and our kids will grow up together and they have cousins, we have aunts, we have all these big reunions sometimes in the house. Maybe 30 people having lunch, on the floor everywhere. All my dreams was to grow up there, be there and I love exploring the world, I love travelling. I wanted to go back home.

In 2001 I worked in a company. It's owned by a Kurdish family and they're a very great family. They're part of the political party. His dad was part of the Shah cabinet and he's a very well-known person. And in Iraq he was kind of like put away because Saddam Hussein was afraid of them. But they were part of the - we called it when America came to Iraq - they were part of this change because they start to work with Americans before that. To get rid of Saddam Hussein.

So, when I worked with them I did not pay attention in the beginning, but when ... March 2003 start to come closer, I start to see the (unintelligible 12:54) in our company and other things. I start to... they ask me to go bring dictionary cause they wanted to send messages on the (unintelligible 13:03) you know, but they were like, 'Bring us a normal dictionary.' And I know that's what they're doing. And I was like, 'I'm not going to take for them a military dictionary.' Because I know what's there. But my dad is like, 'Don't.' Because I guess if they, the Iraqi government came to them, there's nothing (unintelligible 13:28) say, 'Okay, they are a part of that'.

In 2003, I remember the day Saddam Hussein statue went down. I don't think that anyone ever... remember, not remember, but, expected that. It was a shock. I seriously remember everyone standing in the street. Most people are looking to each other, they don't know if they're happy, if they are sad, if they are...what's there. They don't know because it's something they did not expect - they wished for, but they did not expect it.

When 2003 I started to work with this company, I become like, 'Okay, I'm going to be part of the change in my country.' I don't want to do anything. Iraq will be better. It will take time but it will be great, and (14:38 unintelligible) pushed through everything, 2005, 6, 7. I remember when I used to go to work, we all leave in the same time and we all looked to my dad and was, 'OK, seeya!' But we don't know if we'll see my dad. Cause you don't know if you're in the traffic light and an explosion will happen and it's over, or you will be in a work - cause I used to work with Americans and we used to do rehabilitation for places to construction, like snipers target our work. Sometimes people on the ground, or people just - we are hiding just to be alive. But we were like, 'It's okay. It will change. It will change. It will change.'

And my two brothers ... safe and we all worked with the coalition when they came to Iraq and we never felt that we want to leave. We were like, 'Okay, it will be okay.' But it came a point- they start to target, to ask about my siblings, about me. You never are okay being there because if you're working in a construction company and you're doing work for Americans and something goes wrong. All these people who work for them – they come after you. And it did happen that people came to my home and they start to threat killing us. It's like, 'Yeah, you work for the Americans.', and we had to move from our house to another house and we never had any relationship with our neighbours, it was hard but it was just to keep us alive. People never knew what we do (16:31). Who we are, what we... but we start to promote that we are Kurdish from Iran, because the government are all Shia so it was like we have to push that so people will not come after us because – and that's what made us like, 'Okay, we can stay, we can be alive.'

Until I worked in 2010 till 2014 on base. We provided water for the Department of State, Department of Defense. But most of the time I couldn't go back home because... leave the base and going home, you're at risk to be killed on the way. So sometimes for a month I don't go home, I just stay on base, I don't see my family. And if I need to leave, sometimes I leave in the night or leave in the morning. Or leave and then ask the driver or someone with us just to go fast, 'cos there is a space between the gate and to the first intersection. That's where always snipers and other things been there, so it will target you. We went through it.

There came a point that I cannot stay there anymore. It's not where I am. I cannot thrive, I cannot work. I grow up in a house, we are not like very this, how you call it, I don't know the word – very radical? Is Muslim rad-

Interviewer: Unintelligible (18:26)

Rita: Yeah, like religion, it's part of who we are. I dress us, I don't put scarf on my head, I don't – you know, these things it's not how I grow up with but the culture start to be this way. You know, the religion start to push you to be this way. You have to act this way and I wasn't this way, and I couldn't you know. I'm a person I'll tell you exactly what I think and 'That's not right, yeah, whatever who you are. This is not right.'

And people, the culture, everything's changed to a way that you can't have a conversation with someone. Like if you disagree with someone, maybe you will lose your life after that, 'cause you said, 'No, that's not right. I don't agree with you.' Or you explain to them your point of view and it's like, 'No, that's not then – you are not part of us. We will take you out.'

Interviewer: Once you realised it had got to that point, what was your plan?

Rita: My plan was - the good thing when I was on base, I have people who was like, 'Come on, apply for SIV. And I was like 'No, I don't want to.' They were like, 'Rita, just apply for SIV, it's just, go there, get your green card and see if Iraq become better, you don't know. Just stay there.' And when I applied for it, it took a year and a half to get approved. It doesn't come this way. You have background check, you have everything to be done. They will send you to a place to get your blood. You get examined from the health part of it. And then they will do background check on you. Even when you work on the base, even if you have like your biometric and eye picture and your fingers. Everything! You still go through that process. When I finished, they said, 'Okay, we

granted you a green card – the SIV visa, so I had to come to here, and I came to here and I stayed here for forty five days and I got my green card and I went back to Iraq because I still part of a contract we are fulfilling to the Department of State and the Department of Defense. And I cannot just be here. I have to be there to finish that part so I stayed there for five months, come here and go back again.

And then the contract finished end of 2014, beginning of 2015. I was in Erbil – I lived a year and a half in Erbil and ISIS pushed through Mosul, and they came very near to Erbil where I live. Because I was like, 'Okay, I cannot do it in Baghdad. I can live in Erbil.' And I established a company, established a business. I start to – me and my husband export hot tubs from here to Iraq. We never had hot tubs in Iraq but start to educate people about Bullfrog hot tubs. And we have our own showroom. It was great, it was a good start but when ISIS hit, everything went down south. We still have a warehouse, maybe it has \$300,000 inventory. We don't know if this is still there or not.

Interviewer: So, at that point you came here permanently.

Rita: Yeah, 2015. January 2015 I came to Utah (unintelligible 22:22) here.

Interviewer: What was your first impression of Utah?

Rita: Utah is clean, it's nice. It's fun. But it was hard to be alone, feeling alone. Having no one. It was hard (starts crying).

Interviewer: What were the most difficult parts of your transition?

Rita: It's funny, like, not having friends. (Crying) Not having family and being pregnant. You know, all these emotions you are go through. Thinking of your two brothers who are crossing the oceans to their safety. I have to – they went to Turkey 'cause become more risky to stay there and just went to Turkey and they crossed to Greece and we did not know – like one of them, I did not know if he was alive for maybe four, five days and it killed me. He has two kids and he has a wife and I don't know what's going on there. And until they made it to the safety, that was the hardest that I can remember but – I start to have in 2015, my brother safe came through SIV also, came end of 2015.

And then my father came in 2016. But my dad, he did not want to come. He's like, 'I'm 65 and I don't want to come.' So he lived in Erbil, but in Erbil they did not give him a residency. So, if he cannot have a residency, then you cannot stay there and you have to go back to Baghdad. Baghdad he has no one and he has nothing and the threat is still there because all his kids - outside. They were like – okay, he had to leave Baghdad very quiet because they were looking for us and everything, so he had to leave there. And then I begged him, I said, 'You don't want to see (unintelligible 24:53)? Come just for a visit.' So, I applied for a visa (24:55) and they gave him a visa to here and even when he came – he came in end of April. He said, 'No, I'm going back to Iraq.' I said, 'Well, that's okay. Whenever you want to go back.' But it start to get more and more bad and finally he's like, 'Okay.' I said, 'Let's please apply for asylum for you.' So he will be legal there and then we'll go through the process, see how it goes. And he's there since that time. He got his social, he got his work permit and we're waiting for his first interview to see if they'll grant him asylum here but we're hopeful that he will – he can stay here.

(25:40) Interviewer: There's so much I'd love to ask you about your life, we don't have a lot more time, but I would like to ask a little more about the life you've built here for yourself and your family. How would you describe your life currently?

Rita: Crazy? I don't have time (chuckles), I have people calling me and leaving messages, like, 'We'll never call you again. We don't want to talk to you'. At the start it was hard but –

In 2016, I don't know if I told you this before or not but my husband had a contract in Iraq and – sorry, in Africa, so we lived in Africa for a year in (unintelligible 26:29). It was a great experience to be there and we came here when I wanted to have my second child and coming back here and settling in Utah and looking for the future is difficult because we had to find jobs here and it was hard. For me, even at that time has a degree and experience. I applied for tons of jobs here and it was hard. I couldn't find any job.

But finally I started with G----- Project and it was a great beginning for me and I applied for the MBA program at the U and I am in my first semester, which will end hopefully in December. We'll have our fall break. It's a great experience. Still I feel like the dumbest child in the class because I have to learn all these big languages but I feel grateful to be here, to pursue a dream that I always wanted. I always wanted my master degree. It was great to have that and be part of a great university, part of great program. There is great professors and people who are trying to help you be better. They're trying to find you jobs and help you build your resume, you know, be more, which made me think, 'Okay.'

I'm working right now with G----- as a supervisor, but I was like, 'I need to own my own business.' So we created a business – because did contract with (unintelligible 28:25) in Iraq. I did construction and other things and I was like, 'Let's start our own business. We'll be in charge of our destiny and what we want to be.' So, it's still in the beginning, finishing the papers and everything but it's exciting for me to have my own business, my own life that I can manage, yeah.

Interviewer: What are the other dreams that you have for your future or for your children?

Rita: I'm so thrilled that they born here, I'm so thrilled that they are Americans and they will experience different – it's not like I did not experience – I had a great life. I will not change any of it. Being part of Iraq and being Iraqi, it's a great honour and to be part of America – and I will be a citizen hopefully next year. I started my citizenship process and that will be the greatest honour: to be American. To be part of this great country that took me here. I think America is great to have people follow their dreams and they can be, if they want to. They can be as big as they want to. As big their dreams will be, they can be. If they pursue it right, they can find the right path for them, the can make it. I am sure that I will have my own life, my children will be proud to be part of it and part of who they are.

Interviewer: I'm so impressed with how hard you've worked and it's an honour to hear your story.

Rita: Thank you.

Interviewer: A lot of people who don't understand the experiences the refugees have gone through, and they may – the refugees may be misunderstood. How do you hope people view you?

Rita: Just me. (Unintelligible 30:54) (starts to cry) because sometimes people – you still hear it, 'Why you all here?' It's like, 'I don't know.'. (cries) It's not easy, it's not easy when you look to your country and it's in decay. When you look to the people that you love and they don't have a future, (still crying) when you walk and see all these playgrounds and you think of all the kids in your country who does not have that. They will accept a little to play on the street, the playground. It's a lot. But to have – to think that the future will be great, yeah, it will be okay because I have a hope and faith in the new generation in Iraq. They are standing up for themselves and it will be different and I hope one day I can do something, that I can change their lives. Even if it is just for a little, to share a story, maybe.

Interviewer: Rita, is there anything you want to share with us that we haven't asked about today? Anything else you'd like to share with us?

Rita: Just keep do what you are doing. I guess by sharing other people's stories, you can achieve a lot and when people hear it or see it, it's make different impact on other people and their struggles. And to be a refugee, it's not a shame. And to be proud of who you are and who you will become and having both worlds, be Iraqi and American, it's a great privilege. Or whoever you are from where you are, the thing that I always tell people: 'If you want to have a great life, love your new country and be proud of this new country who took you and hope for the better future for your origin country and be part of the change you want them to change.'

Interviewer: Thank you so much. That's the end of the questions that I have for you unless you have anything else.

Rita: No. Thank you for coming today. It was a great honour to meet you all.