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## **Dilnaz Waraich**



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**Interviewer:** Chad Comello  
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**Transcriber:** Amy Chow

## INTRODUCTION

Dilnaz Waraich has lived in Morton Grove since 1983. Born in Hyderabad, India, she migrated to Chicago as a two-year-old in 1972 with her father, mother, and sister after her father got a work visa. With her hardworking and college-educated parents forced to work menial jobs to support the family—which Dilnaz considers common for a traditional immigrant family—she and her sister were “latchkey kids” who rarely socialized but still enjoyed the comforts of home and reading. (Not so much seeing *Jaws* as a six-year-old.) She attended Chicago Public Schools until age 13, when the family moved to Morton Grove and she started at Maine East High School.

In this interview, Dilnaz talks about growing up first-generation Indian American, the benefits and challenges of living with in-laws, and a traumatizing yet formative experience in third grade that inspired her to become an educator. She also discusses her work as chair of the Muslim Community Center’s Interfaith & Outreach Committee, challenging herself and others to be change agents, and how Morton Grove has evolved from a homogeneous community to an inclusive “potluck” of cultures and faiths.

*This transcript has been edited for content and clarity.*

**DW: Dilnaz Waraich**

**Q: Question asked by interviewer Chad Comello**

Q: Let's start at the beginning. Tell me about where you were born and your upbringing.

DW: My name is Dilnaz Waraich and I was born in 1970 in central India, a place called Hyderabad, India. I have one sister, she's exactly one year older than me. And then I have a mom and a dad. So we lived in central India from 1970 to 1972. My dad migrated to America right after I was born. One of the reasons he migrated to America was he really wanted to have a place for his two daughters—a voice for his two daughters. And he knew as a policeman in Hyderabad, India, either he would need to be doing a lot of illegal work or have to take a couple of other part-time jobs to be able to provide for his two daughters and his wife. He fortunately was able to get a visa, a working visa. He moved over to Chicago in about 1971 and my mom was still in India with her two daughters. Then my dad was able to get a visa for my mom and myself and my sister in 1972.

So on November 24, 1972, my mom and sister and I came on a TWA flight. My mom talks about it. She had never left India. She didn't know how to speak English, she did not realize November 24 was going to be a cold, cold winter day in Chicago. She had a sweater on, a sari on, this chubby little girl sitting on her lap that was one year old, and then my sister sitting on the seat next to her. While I was sitting on her lap, I just started crying and I was really burning up and I was hot. My mom was like, *Oh my*

*God, this little girl is sick.* She didn't know how to communicate to the flight attendant that my daughter was not feeling well. And then she was worried—what would she tell the flight attendant, what would the flight attendant do? I ended up getting the chicken pox as I was coming to America for the first time with my mom.

So I started getting spots, everything was happening to me that made my mom very uncomfortable. And the flight attendant saw that my mom was very physically uncomfortable and then there was this little girl not feeling well. My mom says to this day—and that's 46 years ago—that that TWA flight attendant was my mom's guardian angel. She literally got my mom whatever medication she needed. She got my mom a cold towel, a warm towel, water. And as the flight was landing, the flight attendant helped my mom get her luggage, helped her go through immigration. At O'Hare airport, when those sliding doors open and my mom went through, the flight attendant helped her with myself and my sister, who was three years old at the time. We went through the sliding doors at O'Hare airport and my dad was waiting there and he was so happy to see his wife and his two kids. My dad didn't know exactly what was happening the past 24 hours. I always wonder, in 2019, had a woman coming from India with two daughters—one getting the chicken pox on the airplane—would she have been able to go through the sliding doors at O'Hare airport or would she be sent back?

Q: Right, it would be a very different experience now in several ways.

DW: Yeah. So everyone has their guardian angels. My mom said that she doesn't remember what the flight attendant's name was. She doesn't even know where she

came from, but she said, *That woman helped me, and without that woman I would not be here in America.*

Q: Wow. What has your dad told you about his work in India as a policeman?

DW: Yeah, so my father was a very low-level police officer. He did get his college degree. This was just a position that opened up for him. He worked really hard. My dad's always been a very hardworking, honest, ethical person. And to be a police officer in Hyderabad, India, you couldn't be ethical. You had to take bribes. You had to let a lot of people get away and slide with a lot of criminal activities. And it was just really killing him internally. So when he got the visa to come to America, he jumped at the chance. Not even for himself. He always said, *I jumped at the chance because I knew I have two daughters.* And raising two daughters in India is very different than raising two daughters in America. I always think about how America and India, we're still struggling for women's voices and women empowerment. This was back in 1970 and now it's 2019 and we're still struggling to get women in politics, women in board positions, women in leadership positions. And that's still true in India as well.

Q: What are your early memories of your father as a person? What was he like?

DW: My mom and my dad are extremely driven, hardworking people. We were the traditional immigrant family. So when we moved here in 1972, we lived in a small little condo in Chicago on Lake Shore Drive. All I remember is my parents, even though they

had college degrees in India and they were well-respected, they came here and unfortunately were not able to get good positions here. So they did a lot of menial labor, a lot of labor I don't think they expected to do, but they needed to pay the rent. They needed to make sure there was food at the table. But that also drives a lot of emotions and hostility. There was a lot of anger in our home because my dad wasn't happy with the place in his world, in his life. He thought America was going to be better for him. Those first few years were really difficult for my parents. They had marital issues. They definitely had financial issues.

And then you have these two daughters that are wanting to be raised in America and have a different way of life. My parents were like, *We don't understand these two girls. This was not how we were raised in India.* So there were a lot of struggles. But I always compare it to the Irish immigrants or the Italian or the Jewish immigrants. This is the immigrant story. It's a struggle. We as immigrants know we come here with challenges and we are OK with those challenges because we know it's better than being back at home. My parents had the very traditional immigrant story of hardworking immigrants that were working poor, that challenged themselves, that did this for their children. At the end—now I'm 49—my parents are so thankful that they did struggle really, really hard initially and see the fruits of their labor.

Q: Because you didn't have any memories or experience being in India really, right? Was that a challenge growing up between you and your parents? Or I guess, between you and your sister and your parents? Having this sort of American upbringing versus their more traditional understanding. Was there a conflict between that? Or was it

something that you worked through?

DW: As I raise my two sons right now—I have a 21 year old and almost 19 year old—I can tell you raising children... it doesn't matter if you're immigrant parents or you're parents that are just raising teenagers or young adults—it's hard. Raising children is the most difficult thing that anyone is given that luxury, the test, the blessings to do. You just have to breathe through it every single day. It's a breathing process. But I think there's an additional pressure if you are coming from different cultures. My parents came from a certain culture where there is definite respect for elders. And if elders say something, you just follow through. There's no question, there's no critical thinking, there's no, *Hmm, let's discuss this. This is a democracy.* My dad said we need to go to sleep at 9:30, we just went to sleep at 9:30. Whereas I feel like now, when I raise my own children, there's a lot of, *Well, if you're not tired at 9:30 I guess you could read a book. Let's wonder, what is a good bedtime for you?* So, I think there's a lot more democracy, there's a lot of give and take between the way I raise my kids. And me also understanding that the authoritative parenting style is not the ideal parenting style. The permissive parenting style is not ideal parenting style. It's somewhere in between, where there is a give and take between parents and children.

We didn't have a much give and take when it came to my dad. You could tell he was an unhappy man because he was so unhappy at work. He was so unhappy with how his world turned out for him that he brought that home. My mom of course got the brunt of it, and my mom always protected us and made sure my sister and I were never getting too much of the anger that my dad was bringing in. It wasn't a great household

I'd say majority of the time, but we worked on it. That's what I love about families. It doesn't matter where you are in the economic spectrum, where you are in the social spectrum. It's your family life, right? I think my mom and dad were not quitters. They were going to make this marriage work. They were going to make sure that their daughters were going to have voices. Their daughters were going to get good degrees. My parents worked really hard and I know both of my parents were resilient individuals.

Q: Tell me about some memories of growing up in Chicago in those early years.

DW: I'm a product of Chicago Public Schools, all the way through from preschool. Head Start schools is what started me. We weren't able to afford preschool that we could pay for, so Head Start was a free program where undeserved individuals were able to get preschool funding. My mom was working. My mom always worked. My dad always worked, but they had odd hours. I remember my sister and I—it was fascinating—we would just walk to school when we were very young, and we'd walk back home. We didn't have the luxury of having a mom that picked us up or a dad that dropped us off. I remember we would make breakfast. We would have cereal in the morning. We would come home from school and we were definitely latchkey kids. We would watch TV countless hours. But when my parents came home at the end of the day, there was definitely a sense of respect. We knew they worked really hard. We knew they weren't just leaving us there because they wanted to leave us there. This was the life that we needed to get through.

I do remember very distinctly Friday nights was like our family time. We would sit together and watch *The Lawrence Welk Show*. [laughter] I mean, here is this very Indian family. We would sit and watch *The Lawrence Welk Show*. We would these beautiful women and men dancing and beautiful music. My mom would have probably spent an hour cooking Indian food where we had *chole* and *tamatar ki chutney* and *gosht ka salan* and all this food. We would bring the food downstairs to the basement and we had probably a 60-inch larger TV, and we would sit and watch *Lawrence Welk* while eating our Indian food and just had the best time. It was those Friday nights that I remember going, *Wow, I love my family. This is my family. I'm really happy to be here.*

Q: So what was your relationship with your sister like growing up?

DW: We were Irish twins. We were only about 13 months apart. I think she was my best friend and she was also my worst enemy. [laughter] Definitely. To this day, I think we can very definitely say that we are still each other's friends and we are each other's enemies. 'Til this day. I think a lot of sisters have that relationship, especially when you're so close. My sister and I were extremely close. I also think my parents had a hard time raising two daughters. I bring this back because I think it's different for an Indian family to have two daughters versus two sons. I think that might still be true in our present today, which is kind of a gender issue that all of the world is still focusing on. My parents would, because they weren't home, they always said, *Make sure you stay at home, don't talk to anyone, don't join sports, don't do this, don't do that.* So my sister

and I unfortunately weren't able to do a lot of afterschool activities. After school we literally had to come home, watch TV, get our homework done, clean the house, do things like that. Because we were such a new immigrant family—and I think about how other immigrants were very similar to my parents—my parents wanted us to live in our little silos. They wanted us to make sure that we were at home and not really being corrupted by the rest of the world or being influenced too much. We were the very traditional Indian family.

So I think there were times where my sister and I just kind of hated being together, home alone in the evenings Monday through Friday. We wanted to get out and do stuff, but we didn't. We were very respectful. My parents wanted to stay at home, so we stayed at home. When we went on to high school, we really pushed our parents to let us join the tennis club or the badminton team or join the drama team. It was a real push and pull between our parents. They just didn't understand why we would need to do badminton or tennis or join any club. You know, *What are you getting out of that? Why don't you just sit at home and read?* There's just so much that we can read, and we did enjoy reading. We were ferocious readers and we read all the time. Like I said, we were best friends but also worst enemies, and that's because our parents didn't really know how to give us our own independence and also give us the autonomy we needed. There were struggles like that at home.

Q: Do you remember doing any sort of outings when you did have the opportunity, like on weekends or special events?

DW: Yeah, I think when it was the four of us and it was a Friday night or Saturday, I really remember great outings. I just remember my mom and dad and my sister and I, for our birthdays, every year when it was our birthday really our big outing was to go to Ponderosa, right on Dempster Street in Morton Grove. We used to go to Ponderosa and we would get this really great meal. I think for 99 cents you could get ice cream and you could get a meal for \$9.99 or something. But that was our huge celebration. Those were really fun events.

I remember when we, probably twice a year, went a movie. We went to go see that movie *Jaws*, which was like the worst movie to have a five-year-old and a six-year-old watch because 'til this day I am so scared of swimming in the ocean or swimming in the lake. We even have a pool and I'm scared of being in the water, and it's because my parents didn't know anything about babysitters. They had no idea what a babysitter was. They just knew date night meant bring all four of us together. [laughter] So, it was really funny, date night for my parents was us going to a movie twice a year. They sat together and then we sat next to them, but I'm thinking that's not really much of a date night. [laughter] That's still a family outing. So we went to go see *Jaws* and I remember I was five years old and my sister was six years old and that scared the living daylights out of both of us. It still haunts us to this day. Probably a year into watching *Jaws*—so I must have been six years old—for that entire year I could not take a shower if I didn't leave the door open or my sister was sitting on the toilet seat reading her book. So we used to compromise, *OK, if I take a shower, you need to sit on the toilet seat and when you're done, I'll sit on the toilet seat.* So, it was really funny how we were supporting each other from something horrible our parents did, but they didn't think anything of it.

Like, *what's the big deal? We're going to a movie.* So we saw some really interesting movies with my parents. They did not know what a babysitter meant at all.

Q: What other interests did you have growing up at the time, either at school or elsewhere?

DW: When we talk about school, I really think the reason I became an educator is how education affected me. I'm going to go back to third grade. I was at Rufus M. Hitch School and my teacher's name was Mrs. Koon. This was a very vivid memory of mine and I actually talk about it quite frequently when I do a lot of talks with my preservice teachers saying how important an educator is to any child. So as I'm walking to school—I remember it was in April, a nice, springy day—and there were two things on my mind. On my mind was I hate school and I hate Mrs. Koon. As I'm walking to school I'm thinking, *God, I hate school. No one likes me at school. I just hate school.* And then I'm thinking, *Ugh, I hate my teacher. Mrs. Koon is so mean. She doesn't understand me.*

So I get to my school, I sit down. Mrs. Koon starts telling us how it's an Iowa testing day. I was like, *Oh my God, I have to take a test?* All of that nervousness came into me. And this is that April morning and my stomach started churning. I was like, *Oh my God, I hate school. I hate Mrs. Koon. I hate tests.* My stomach was really churning, and I really needed to do something but I could not think of the word. Because at home we spoke in Urdu. We were very comfortable as that was our native language. I came to school. I spoke well English. Everyone knew I spoke well English. I had a few friends

here and there. But I just didn't feel comfortable. So while my stomach is churning, I needed to tell Mrs. Koon that I needed to... but I didn't know what the word was. So now I'm thinking, *Oh my God, should I spoil her room? Should I run out the door?* I don't know what to do. This situation has haunted me, and this was when I was eight years old. This is 40 years moving forward and I still remember this situation.

I decided not to ruin Mrs. Koon's classroom and I went straight to the wooden door, I turned the doorknob, and ran straight to the bathroom. All I remember is Mrs. Koon screaming at me going, *Dilnaz, get back in here! How dare you leave my classroom! It's my classroom, what did you want to do?* And I'm thinking, I need to... I need to... So I get to the bathroom, and I didn't get to the bathroom. I got to the sink and I just—it was the word "throw up". I could not tell her the word "throw up". So then I just threw up and I felt so much better! At that point I realized, I'm sure someone was going to come and save me. I'm sure Mrs. Koon is going to come in after me and ask if I'm OK or something. So I sit at the sink for about five minutes and no one came to save me. Then I went and sat down right by the paper towel holder. I probably sat there for like 10, 15 minutes. No one came to check on me.

At that point it hit me, as an eight-year-old girl: Mrs. Koon really hated me. I *hated* school. So there was this real animosity where I was like, *Why am I in this school?* Because I know my teacher hates and I know I don't really like school, so why do I need to be in school? I just stood up and lingered back into the third-grade classroom. I opened that wooden door and Mrs. Koon, the first things she did was say, *How dare you leave my classroom? You get back there and you finish that Iowa test.* I think now, as an adult that has been in the teaching world for almost 23 years—

I've been in elementary classrooms, high school classrooms, collegiate classrooms, and now I'm an educational facilitator—I think how that one day affected the rest of my trajectory. I always think that, as an immigrant and underserved student, how important it is for teachers to connect with their students. If you don't have that connection, you've really lost a student. That entire year I just hated Mrs. Koon. Thank God I went on to fourth grade and had Mrs. Wojewodzki and she was so much better. I know academically I did better as well. But it's really important that teachers and students connect.

Q: Was there anything going on that made it difficult, related to your classmates or other teachers? Or specifically as an immigrant, do you feel like you were discriminated against in that school? What do you think were the factors that went into that?

DW: We lived on the Northside of Chicago, so I went to a school that had predominantly white students, and there was my sister and I. As we walked to school, I remember we would cross Milwaukee Avenue and get to our school. It was two miles, so we would walk two miles every single day. And I was thinking, *Gosh, we crossed Milwaukee Avenue and there were no crossing guards*. My parents weren't there to walk us there and everything. I'm thinking nowadays, I just don't think kids walk by themselves two miles without parents or crossing guards. My sister and I would walk to school together and we walked the way back. And we did have some friends, but I do think there was a sense of we were the "other" and there was always a sense that we didn't really fit in.

Because everyone talked about Christmas and we didn't celebrate Christmas. Everyone talked about summer vacations and really enjoying themselves like going swimming and going to their grandmother's house. Well, I didn't have a grandmother here. Literally, it was just my mom and dad and my sister and I. We just didn't have any extended family. And then when they talked about Christmas, I was like, *Wow that sounds really nice*. I never thought to equate it with—guess what, we have two Eids, and during our Eid celebrations we have a really good time. But it was always that I was never part the culture of power, and because I was never part of the culture of power, I always felt less-than. More than other people making feel less-than, I felt less-than.

So I think as students, it's important to make students realize that they do have certain rights and they do have certain privileges, and they should bring those privileges into the classroom. I'm not going to blame CPS for it. I'm also going to blame myself for not taking the ownership to agree to be in plays and be in all these activities. Now we have all of these refugee students that are coming to CPS schools. We have so many black and brown children that don't have voices in CPS schools. It comes back to leadership understanding their students and also students stepping up and saying, *Hey I want to be heard, I want to be part of this play, I want to take a leadership role*. It's a symbiotic relationship where the leaders of the school understand the social and emotional learning of the child, and then the child also stepping up and being like, *Hey, I want to be a part of it*.

Q: How would you describe your religious upbringing? And then how that influenced you as this girl growing up in American culture at that time.

DW: So we went from CPS schools, and then when I was 13 I was going to start high school and my sister had already done one year of high school. Because we lived in Chicago, our local high school... my parents weren't really happy with it. So my parents worked really hard and sent my sister to Resurrection High School, because they knew that was a good Catholic high school and they wanted us to get a good high school degree. That was financially OK for sending one child to a private high school, but to send two children to a private high school, that would just not be acceptable for my parents' financial capability at that point. So at the age of 13 we moved to Morton Grove, right on Washington and Wilson Terrace. My parents predominantly moved to Morton Grove because they knew Maine East High School was a really good high school. They knew the community in Morton Grove was welcoming and accepting. So that's why we moved from Chicago to Morton Grove. That's when I started at Maine East. I was at Maine East for my four years of my high school. My sister was there for three years of her high school. Being products of CPS, academically we did well.

I think it was always between culture and religion. Culture, for us, we grew up more Indian than we did Muslim. It wasn't always like, *Make sure you tell people you're Muslim*. It's more like, *Make sure you tell people you're Indian*. So we were very culturally driven. Every three years we were able to go back to India and visit my aunts, uncles, my mom's mother, who was the only grandparent that was alive. It was very important for my parents to be culturally Indian. It wasn't very important for my parents to be Muslim. So when I was at school—the CPS school and at Maine East—I think

culturally I didn't really feel American and culturally I really didn't feel Indian. So there was this quandary of who am I? What am I?

I think of Toni Morrison who just passed away recently. There was a book called *The Bluest Eye* that she wrote and it really talks about how everyone that isn't part of a school or culture that's well accepted wants to be with blue eyes and blonde hair because that's what is accepted, right? So when I looked at a magazine, I never saw a representation of myself on a magazine. When I turned the television on, I never saw a representation of me. So I feel like there's a lot of people coming from diverse backgrounds that don't see themselves on television, in newspapers, and on media, and that makes us feel less-than. So that's the feeling and the sentiment that I had growing up.

But when I got home, it was interesting because my mom and dad—the majority of the time, when they weren't going through financial issues and stuff—they would tell my sister and I, *You guys are the greatest things ever. You're the most beautiful, the most intelligent. You can do anything you want.* My parents always built us up to, *You can do anything you want, you're amazing. Just go for it. Just go for it.* So I think when I was at home, I felt very comfortable. I felt very accepted. It was literally when I walked out the door where I was like, *Do I feel OK being at Maine East? Is Maine East accepting me?* Not for my religious sentiments but more for my cultural sentiments.

Q: So you moved to Morton Grove in, what, the mid-1980s?

DW: 1983.

Q: What was Morton Grove like at that time?

DW: Morton Grove was a very homogeneous community. Pretty much everyone was of a certain socioeconomic background, hardworking families, definitely predominantly Caucasian. You didn't see much diversity. If you fast forward now to 2019, you really see the diversity now. You really see that there's a lot of families that are moving in to make sure that there's a larger community here that look like them and sound like them. That are welcoming, probably more so than in 1983. Once again, even though my parents moved here for a better school and a better community, it's not as if we really got to know our neighbors very well. I think that is such a sad situation because now, as an adult, I've got my two sons. We have block parties. We know all of our neighbors. We're just so much part of the community. I'm on a lot of boards on my community.

But for my parents, it was just financially hitting those boundaries. Making sure you financially can pay the mortgage. Making sure you can get your kids the supplies they need. It wasn't about being on the board of the library. It wasn't about making sure our community had the right stop sign and making sure that the gun policies were set in place, because my parents couldn't think about those things. You have blinders on. And your blinders as an immigrant is just this rat race of getting the financials you need, getting your kids into the schools that they want, and that's all my parents could think about.

I am so privileged now as an adult because my parents have worked so hard. I am not in that rat race. I am part of the community. I am part of gun violence control and making sure we have livable wages and making sure that there's equity in education, equity in all of our spaces that we're in. My parents weren't able to do those things for us because they were hardworking immigrants, but the second generation that my sister and I are in, we are able to. We get into politics. We make sure we get our voices heard.

Q: Coming from high school, what was your life like after that?

DW: I graduated from Maine East. I went to Loyola University. I still lived with my parents in Morton Grove when I attended Loyola University. I did go to Sunday School. The mosque that I predominantly went to was the Muslim Community Center. The Muslim Community Center in 1986 bought the location in Chicago on Elston Street and then in 1988 bought the location in Morton Grove. The location in Morton Grove, it's interesting that even though my parents purchased the home in Morton Grove in 1983, we weren't big into going to MCC when it opened up in 1988. It was like, maybe if we went for Eid—we have two religious holidays, Eid al-Adha and Eid al-Fitr—we would go there for Eid prayers. It wasn't like we had to go there or like, *Wow, we moved to Morton Grove and thank God we have this mosque.* It was just like, *Wow, we moved to Morton Grove. Interesting, we have this mosque here.* Religion was not in the forefront. Our culture was very much in the forefront. Getting a good degree was in the forefront. And

then, *Oh great, we have time to pray. Let's go pray at the mosque.* So something like that.

When I was at Loyola University, I had gone to MCC, the one in Chicago, and I was a Sunday School teacher. While I was a Sunday School teacher there—just because I had some free time and I was getting an elementary education degree—I wanted to support students in the Sunday School program and make sure the Sunday School program was a good program. I ended up being more at the Muslim Community Center in Chicago and that's where I met my husband. So when I met my husband at MCC, we got married right when I was in the middle of college and stuff.

In 1992, after I graduated from Loyola University with an Elementary Education degree, I came back to Morton Grove to be a teacher. I was a third-grade teacher for 10 years. I did not realize I was a third-grade teacher for 10 years. I think because I thought Mrs. Koon was such a horrible teacher, I'm going to go back full circle and I choose a third-grade position because I wanted to make sure my third-grade students did not have such a difficult situation like I did. So for 10 years I taught third grade in Morton Grove, and then after that I went on to teaching higher ed.

Q: And then where did you teach in Morton Grove?

DW: I taught at MCC Academy, which is Morton Grove on 8601 Menard Street. I really enjoyed it. Now my students are between 25 and 32. [laughter] I saw them at a play the other day and they were like, *Oh my God, Mrs. Waraich, how are you doing?* And I'm like, *Oh my God.* And they have their own children, so yeah, it's a beautiful thing. Full

circle. I really disliked third grade and I ended up being a third-grade teacher. I really enjoyed my 10 years as a third-grade teacher. Now I get to see the students that I taught for a good full year and those students are growing up and they're doing amazing things. I always say, it always goes back to your third-grade teacher. And they were like, *Really?* And I was like, *Yes, that's why you're so great!* [laughter]

Q: It's funny, I had a bad third-grade experience too, and it definitely sticks with you. So that's great that you wanted to be intentional about making that a positive thing.

DW: Well, they say third grade is a real pivotal year. Because kindergarten, first, and second are just little younger grades and you're just getting used to school. But third grade is when you really do cursive and start really writing critical paragraphs and stuff. It's that transitional year. Then fourth and fifth grade you get a little harder.

Q: Tell me about meeting your husband.

DW: Sure! My husband and I met at MCC in Chicago. His father was my Sunday School teacher. My husband was an only child and he used to pick up his dad every Sunday at like one o'clock to drive him home. You can pretty much ask anyone that has known him—he probably is the greatest man in the Muslim Community Center. He was such a great leader in the business world. He was an amazing leader in our mosque at the Muslim Community Center. He was an amazing storyteller. When we went to Sunday School and he was my Sunday School teacher, he would tell stories. If we were to do a

story about the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, he would never say, *Here's a book, read it.* He would just come up with story after story. The reason I know so much about the Prophet and the Sahabas, which are the friends of the Prophet, is because my father-in-law was my Sunday School teacher. He would just tell story after story. Everyone that ever had him as a teacher will say, *The only reason I know about the Prophet is through your father-in-law's teaching stories.*

He passed away about four and half years ago and that was a huge, huge blow to our family. I've been married for about 26 years and I lived with this man, my father-in-law, and in 26 years I never saw that man get angry or raise a voice or do anything. And he was an amazing businessman. I remember he would fly to China and be away for two weeks, and he'd come home at like eight o'clock at night. But the next day he would get up at six o'clock and have breakfast and tell us these great stories about China and this ambassador that he met or that ambassador. I turn to my husband and go, *Is he lying? I don't get it. I just don't understand this man.* Like how could he be doing these amazing things and be so humble at home? He was the humblest man at home. After I had kids, he must have kissed my sons about 50 times a day. I'm not kidding, 50 times a day. My sons would be like, *Oh God, stop kissing us.* [laughter]

When he was at home, he was 100 percent at home. But he was at work, he was 100 percent at work. So yeah, when I met my husband, I'm like, *If you're anything like your dad, for sure I'd like to...* [laughter] My husband and my father-in-law are really, really different. But my husband is an only child. It's interesting. Both of us always stayed in Chicago. We have never moved outside of Chicago. I think in a way that's sad. I would have loved to be an international traveler and moved here and there. But

my husband went to University of Chicago, went to Northwestern. I did Loyola and Northwestern, so we've always been in Chicago. We've been very close to our family. The reason we didn't move is because my in-laws were right here, and we wanted to live close to them. My parents live right here in Morton Grove still, so we wanted to live close to them. Then when we had kids, it was such a great way for my kids to be close to their grandparents.

Q: So when did you get married?

DW: I got married right in the middle of college. My husband was in his master's at that point. We've been married now for about 26 years. I always say marriage is a choice. You choose to fall in love over and over again. Because there's those loveless marriages that you hear about, and then there's marriages that you are working at it every day. So marriage is a choice and we make a choice to be together and fall in love. There's definitely challenges. Anyone who says that there are not challenges, I'm not sure how they're surviving. [laughter] I don't know. But we have a really, really passionate marriage where he does what he's really passionate about and I do what I'm really passionate about. He knows at the end of the day we compromise.

We had years and years of infertility, so we had kids a lot later than we had originally expected. I always think in our marriage, there's never really been a point where we both were like super high or super low together. When I was very much struggling with infertility, he was 100 percent supporting me. When there were struggles that he had, I 100 percent supported him. I think that's why we got through it. I feel

fortunate that our personalities are so different that when we most needed each other, we were able to figure it out.

Q: Once you did have kids, what were some epiphanies or things that you learned contrasting with your own upbringing and having your own experience with your own parents?

DW: Yeah, that's interesting. [laughter] I think what happened with raising our own kids—so our first son we ended up adopting. We adopted him from Pakistan because my husband's family is originally from Lahore, Pakistan, and my family is originally from Hyderabad, India. When we were courting, my husband and I, it was really funny because if you know anything about India and Pakistan, you know they do not get along. My dad is the biggest Indian supporter. I mean, anything can happen but he loves India. And my father-in-law was the biggest Pakistan supporter. God forbid you say anything negative about Pakistan. When I was realizing this is definitely the guy that I want to marry, I told my dad, *You cannot talk about India in front of my father-in-law. I'm just telling you, you can't do that.* And then he went to his dad and said, *You can't talk about Pakistan in front of her dad because there's just no way.* So gosh, my father-in-law was alive for 20-some years of our marriage and my parents and his parents got along so well, but we never discussed India and Pakistan.

Q: Wow, so it worked? [laughter]

DW: It worked. It worked [laughter]. My parents love my husband and his parents loved me. So, it was like, why ruin the marriage? It's not even necessary to do that. So we just never discussed politics whatsoever. Then we had children. Like I said, it took a while, and we did adopt our first son Mulson. I always think how certain things are a gift, and he was the biggest gift in our life. There is no gift that we could have received that could equate to what we got when we had our first son. He was a huge asset to our home. He completely changed everything. My father-in-law would crawl on the ground and watch him. When I was working, my in-laws watched my kids all the time. That's what they loved to do. I wasn't so selfish in the sense like, *I don't want my in-laws to control my kids.*

I'll tell you a funny story. When I was pregnant with our second son, I had a quite few miscarriages in between. I did get pregnant with our second son. When I was pregnant for some odd reason, I knew for sure I was having a daughter. Everyone thought I had an ultrasound. I had no ultrasound that was showing the gender. But I just knew I was having a daughter. I had these feelings I was having daughter. So my father-in-law said, *OK, let's make a deal. If you have a son, I'm going to name him. If you have a daughter, you can name her.* And I was like, *Oh, that's so easy, of course I'm going to have a daughter!* And my husband kept going, *How do you know we're going to have a daughter? Why would you agree to that?* I'm like, *I know we're having a daughter so let your father think what he wants.* Lo and behold, I delivered and it was a boy. I tell the doctor, *No, it's not! It's a girl!* And he was like, *No, it's a boy.* [laughter] So we got along super well.

I let my parents, my in-laws, do a lot of parenting because I felt like they loved the kids. At the end of the day, of course all of us love the kids but there is no competition. There really isn't. My parents might have spoiled them a little. I know my father-in-law and my mother-in-law gave them tons of candy. But at the end of the day it's the love that the kids get. When they see that there are these six adults that just love this little child, that's what really makes a well-developed child. I feel like that's what I missed out on when I was growing up. I only had my mom and dad. We had no other family members, so it was hard on my parents. They never were able to just be a husband and wife, because my parents didn't know how to do that. Whereas I'm very fortunate. I totally travel with my husband. We go on vacations. We never worry about babysitters or caregivers because we've got these great in-laws. Now my kids are 21 and 18, so they don't really need babysitters anymore.

Q: So you said you lived with your in-laws?

DW: Yeah.

Q: OK, so how long was that? Or is that still going on?

DW: [laughter] Yeah, that's a whole cultural thing and I would not recommend that for my next generation. I am very clear with my own sons. It's a cultural thing. The son usually lives with his parents. We had agreed to it and that's kind of what worked out. There's a lot of compromise that goes into it. There's a lot of give and take that goes

into it. And it usually ends up falling on the daughter-in-law, right? So I had to compromise probably the most. I had to really make sure I had my own identity as well as being a wife and being a mother and being a daughter-in-law and being a daughter and being a sister.

But what is Dilnaz? What is Dilnaz's voice and role? So that was very important for me. At the end of the day, did I really do what I wanted to do? I thought initially, no, I gave up too much of myself. I think about now they say like "mid-life crisis." When I was about 45, I would not say I went through a mid-life crisis. I went through a mid-life awakening. I had an awakening that I don't think I'm really my complete self. I think in my twenties and thirties a lot that time is done with self-identity, with figuring out who you are, and I wasn't completely able to do that. When I turned 45, I needed to take time out for myself and be the person that I want. So I just booked a ticket for myself to go to Kilimanjaro and I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro.

Q: Wow.

DW: Yeah. So it was a seven-day hike. I've always been an athletic person. I've been an outdoor person, but I never traveled internationally by myself. I had never done something just for myself because I was either a daughter or a sister or a mother, something like that. I just spent seven days climbing, and every day that I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro I always say to myself, now, every day— you know, Chad, you climb a mountain and I climb a mountain. But that was my real physical way of climbing a mountain and I reached summit. When I reached summit, it wasn't the peak of my

success, it was the seven days of getting to that summit. So how each one of us climbs mountains every day and how each one of us does reach summit every single day. But do we realize that we reach summit? When we get to that summit, are we really reflecting on what worked and what didn't work?

In recent years I've been doing a lot of diversity, equity, and inclusion training. One of my favorite authors and lawyers and activists is Bryan Stevenson. Bryan Stevenson is the founder and executive director of Equal Justice Institute in Birmingham, Alabama. He always says there are four things that we should be asking ourselves every single day. I get up for morning prayer, my Fajr prayer. After my Fajr prayer, I sit there on the prayer mat and I say, *OK God, here are the four things that I want to do*. This comes from Bryan Stevenson. He says as a change agent you need to do these four things. Number one, am I comfortable being uncomfortable? So today, God give me the strength to be comfortable being uncomfortable. Even doing this interview, I kind of feel like, am I comfortable being uncomfortable? Because I have to be raw. I have to share things with you. I'm super comfortable sharing stuff with people. I don't really keep too much hidden.

The next thing that Bryan Stevenson talks about, which I totally connect with on my prayer mat, is proximity. So if I see a problem, it's not writing a check. It's not just making a prayer, but am I getting close to the problem? I think about gun violence in America and how I think that's such a huge issue. On a regular basis, every month we go into Englewood and there is an organization called Inner City Muslim Action Network and there's another organization called Mothers Against Senseless Killings. We go to Englewood and we get proximate. We get to the problem where there's gun violence.

Just three weeks ago, two women were killed on the block that I was at literally two days before that. I could have been that woman that was killed there, but I wasn't killed that day. But two days later two other women were killed on that corner. It's important to get to where the problem is so you really see the problem, where you feel the problem, where you hear the problem. Number one is getting comfortable being uncomfortable. Number two is proximity.

Number three is hope. I need to live in hope, and I need to give other people hope as well. I think growing up what I felt was a lack of hope. When I was at school, I really didn't feel hopeful that I am really going to get good grades or the teachers were supporting me. When I was outside of my home, I really wasn't getting the hope that I needed to feed myself. But I when I was at home, my parents gave me hope. They made me realize, *Dilnaz, you can do anything you want. We got your back.* It's important that I give other students hope, that I give other service teachers hope, and then they also give me hope.

The last thing about being a change agent is changing the narrative. When I think about changing the narrative, I also think about as a Muslim woman, there's a single story that they think about me, right? They see me and they go, *Oh, she's Muslim and she's a female.* There's a single narrative that I carry quite frequently. That's really important that I change that single narrative. I have people realize, you know everything you see on the media about Muslims isn't really accurate. You really need to develop a relationship with a Muslim person. You need to really make sure that that is a solid relationship. Just like I need to develop relationships with people that are affluent or people that are African American or people that are going through other issues. But if I

think, *All queer people are like this or all affluent people are like this*, I'm giving everyone a single narrative and that's not fair. That's not fair. It's really important for me that I live with those four agents of change and I ask God in the morning to give me the strength to be the best person I can using those four narratives.

Q: You mentioned those groups that you're a part of. What other sorts of things are keeping you busy these days?

DW: I have really enjoyed the work that I do with the Muslim Community Center as the Interfaith & Outreach Chair. I've been the chair for the last four years. We've talked about in this interview how me and my family being very siloed and really being comfortable being siloed, which is very traditional for most immigrant families. Now I realize we need to break out of our silos. We need to make sure that we're connecting with our neighbors, we're connecting with our colleagues, we're sharing ideas, we're sharing food.

If you look at a triangle, the top part of the triangle is the relationship. The left side of the triangle, it's knowledge. On the right side of the bottom triangle, it's attitude. No matter how much knowledge you have, if you have a negative attitude you'll never get to that relationship. No matter how much knowledge you have and you get a positive attitude, you actually quickly will get to that relationship. With the Interfaith & Outreach Committee, we really focus on developing relationships. Developing relationships with social justice organizations, with non-profit organizations, with different houses of worship. Every week, I look at my calendar and am like, *What am I*

*going to do this week?* I probably go to two synagogues every week. I probably go to two churches every week. I might go to one mosque every week. I think, how privileged am I to have such a diverse group of friends and diverse group of networks?

I was at this conference the other day and they said, if the leadership in your university or in your non-profit organization does not have a diverse group of friends, how can you expect your students or your staff members to have a diverse group of friends? So myself as mom and myself as the Interfaith & Outreach Committee chair, I can honestly say I have a really great pleasure of having so many different people that I get to know as friends, that I can call as friends, that I also can just pull up on my phone.

What happened with the Muslim travel ban... On January 17, 2017, when the travel ban was starting to be definitely put into place, we actually had an event at our mosque. We were planning an event with a few other organizations and I heard the night before, *Guess what, the travel ban is going to be put into place. You know your event might actually have a few more people than you're expecting.* We were expecting maybe 150 people, because a lot of our events get about 150 to 200 people. So I was like, I think we should be okay with 300 people. That was Friday night.

Then on Saturday morning, I heard Jan Schakowsky wants to come and speak at our mosque. I was like, *Wow, if Jan Schakowsky comes maybe we might have like 350 people.* That's a lot of people in our social hall—maybe we can move up to the gym. The event was at two o'clock. By 12 o'clock all of these politicians were calling me saying, *Can we come and speak? Can we come and speak?* And I'm thinking, *Wow, if we're all standing up, maybe 400 or 500 people can fit in our gym?*

We ended up having 1,800 people. 1,800 people! What we did—it was literally on the moment—we just did a huge rally around the entire Morton Grove area. We walked around on Dempster Street, made a left turn by the Dunkin Donuts there, walked back to Menard, got back to the mosque. We had about 500 or 600 people standing inside the gym. We had hundreds of people outside of the mosque. It was just a great way to say, *We're not going to allow this to happen*. Together we're so much stronger. Together we're going to make a difference. That was a pivotal time in January of 2017.

Then I think about what happened with the Christchurch shootings in New Zealand. I think, again, I don't want to be reactive. I want to be proactive. What ended up happening was right after the shooting we decided to do a vigil at our mosque. In a matter of 24 hours we were able again to get Jan Schakowsky, representative Ram Villivalam, Reverend Neighbors, Rabbi Andrea London. We must have had about 10 reverends, maybe 15 rabbis. The entire Muslim Community Center was filled with about 600 people. We had all this media attention. And that happened only because we had developed relationships, right? You can't have a vigil and within a matter of 24 hours have 600 people show up if you are in your silo and think, *Wow, we need help*. We need to work together. It's because the Muslim Community Center now is going out to synagogues and churches, and the synagogues and churches are seeing the Muslim Community Center as a place of the community. So with our Interfaith & Outreach Committee, we are constantly developing spiritual power, relationship power, and civic power. We only can do those three relationship-building powers if we see each other as integral parts of this community.

Q: Wow, that's amazing. Any other thoughts or things you would want to share about your Morton Grove experience or anything else?

DW: I think Morton Grove is a great potluck. I'm not going to call it a melting pot because I think when you have melting pot you kind of dilute yourself. I think about a potluck. When I come to a potluck and you say, *Hey Dilnaz, come over to my home, it's a potluck*, I'm going to bring the best item I know how to make to this potluck. Morton Grove is a community that's bringing the best of itself to the table, and I want to bring the best of myself and you're going to bring the best of yourself. It's this potluck that we have, and we need to continue working on this potluck. We really need to really broaden this table, where this table is filled with all different types of food, clothing, culture, and awareness. Just keep making this potluck more and more inclusive.