

TRANSCRIPT:

# Poet Against Prejudice

a BYkids film  
THEIR WORLD THEIR FILMS



**Faiza Almontaser:** The first thing I decorated when I moved into this room were these butterflies and when my mom saw them she said, "Look Faiza! They're flying in one direction and like them you will soon fly above all your problems."

But I didn't know if my problems would ever stop at that time.

**Faiza:** That's the [sabayah](#). The traditional sabayah.

**Grandmother:** Sabayah.

**Faiza:** It's like bread.

**Mom:** That's what we made in Yemen.

**Faiza:** I'm originally from Adayana, a village near [Aden in Yemen](#). We had a nice big house with lots of land which my father farmed. We were happy but my parents wanted us to get a better education, so we could have a better future. So, we decided to move to the melting pot of America, New York City.

[Music]

Our family struggled a lot. We didn't speak English. The customs were different than ours and it was hard to get used to living in such a small house and not having a yard and a garden.

I was excited and nervous to start middle school and hoped it was going to be easy to make friends. Unfortunately, some of the other students weren't excited to see me.

**Faiza:** This is exactly where everything happened. Three boys came out and they were hitting me. Took my umbrella. Were hitting me with it. Insulting me with bad language and then all I did was cry and then try to run back to school.

My brother found out. He came out of the school. He was ready to fight and I told him not to because, first of all, they're gone. And second thing, even if you did something, what makes you different than them?

The thing is not just inside the school. Even when you go out at the subway.

I didn't want no more drama and that was the reason why I didn't really want to tell my parents.

Because I know they'll be very concerned. They'll be... very, you know...

I thought they had enough to worry about. I didn't really. All I wanted to do was just go back home and forget all of this foreign

Okay, um...

**Faiza:** [in Arabic] Do you remember when I came home crying from school? How did you feel?

**Faiza's Mother:** [in Arabic] I was upset and worried about you. I would worry about you when you left until you came home. You were being bullied and you were so young and couldn't speak English. And I didn't know how to handle it because I didn't speak English.

**Faiza:** I remember when I was in school and there was this announcement and while they said something about 9 11, like a lot of the students just, I was the spotlight, t just stared at me and I felt like I was just becoming smaller and smaller.

I was very young when it happened. I didn't even know what happened. In fact, I had this... we had this picture of... the twin towers in our house in Yemen and it's... we thought it was beautiful and then when I came here I was blamed for actually bombing that. I had no idea it was bombed. It's terrible. It's just terrible. I mean, I can't think about it. It just really hurts because, you know, I'm a child. I'm still a child. Why do I have to think about all these terrible things?

**Female Family Member:** We're not wearing a scarf because we're forced to wear it. No, my dad didn't force me. My husband didn't force me. Nobody forced me. I did it because of my religion. It's dressing modest.

**Faiza:** Islam taught us to wear the scarf just to protect ourselves and you know not to be, not to show our beauty to everyone. I'm very proud of the way I dress

**Male Family Member:** What are you doing?

**Faiza:** Filming. What do you want to talk about?

**Male Family Member:** I don't know, what, it's a nice date with the family here. Everybody's out.

**Faiza's Father:** [in Arabic] We've gotten used to it here. Now we feel at home in this country and it's in our hearts like no other. I feel like I have personally received great amounts of support here. And have deep respect for all the people who helped us.

**Faiza:** [in Arabic] What kinds of difficulties did you have when you arrived and started all the legal paperwork? Because you didn't speak English either. How did you feel going through it all?

**Faiza's Father:** [in Arabic] My first goal was to reach America. I felt my children would receive a better education here and have greater opportunities. When I arrived here I put my kids in school and drove them every day. I didn't know my way around. I could get from here to the school. I couldn't read the signs because they were in English. So I would try to memorize them so I wouldn't get lost. That was one hard thing for me.

**Faiza's Younger Brother:** Hello!

[Laughter]

**Jamil:** We obviously can't rely on the media to tell what Islam is. I think it's up to us as Americans to really define ourselves and instead of having others define who we are. And that's going to take people like Faiza who are young, who are motivated, who care and actually stand up and stand for what they believe in and in a peaceful way in a loving way and to combat hate with love with compassion. That's tremendous courage.

**Faiza:** Sometimes people are surprised my brother-in-law Jamil is a lieutenant in the NYPD.

**Jamil:** Being a police officer for me is very... It's not even a job. I look at it as more like it's kind of like a way of life. It's really fun helping people, and every day is a different day—that's the greatest part about being a police officer. I think for me, it's like, I don't introduce myself as a Muslim or an Arab. I introduce myself as a human being, as a police officer, as a police lieutenant. Now let people know who you are as an individual, don't let your religion or race define who you are. It's a part of who you are but really what you are is the way you conduct yourselves with others and that's what's going to stand out the most at the end of the day and that's what I try to do at work.

**Faiza:** There have been a lot of inspiring people in my life. My teacher Ms. Merch was one of them. She would support me and always be there for me. Without her, things would have been so much more difficult. [to Ms. Merch] I really wanted you to be in the film because you know everything that I was going through in middle school and you know the struggle that I faced and I was able to talk to you about everything that was going on in my life and also because you're a very special person.

**Ms. Merch:** Well, thank you. When you first told me about it, I was so thrilled that someone had found their way to you. Look what I have! Some of your original poems, and they are pretty special. This is long before you can spell. You wrote it to me on Valentine's day. That was the same day that you gave me this beautiful bracelet!

**Faiza:** Oh wow!

**Ms. Merch:** And I love these poems, and this is where you say 'remember me'.

**Faiza:** Yes.

**Ms. Merch:** And a couple of them are to teachers in general, but some are to me, especially to me.

**Faiza:** *'I wrote this to you, I wrote this for you.*

*I wrote this because you're my favorite teacher,*

*I wrote this because you're part of my future.*

*I wrote this because you are the teacher of teachers,*

*I wrote this because you will stay in the ESL students' hearts and futures.'*

I remember once I came out from class and I was, and you were teaching. I just opened the door and I just sat down. You asked me 'what happened to you, why you were sad?'

**Ms. Merch:** Because you were so frustrated, with real reason, you know? You were always wearing your head covering; all the little boys in our school thought that was weird, and weird is different, and they were always trying to pull it off and that frustrated you. And you were alone.

**Faiza:** And then you gave me the pen, and you gave me my black and white journal, and you said write a poem. That was actually when I really started writing poetry. And then I wrote the poem, and then I realized it made me feel much better, and then that was actually when I... Really what inspired me to write poems, so I really really thank you for that.

**Faiza:** *'And at night, god only knows*

*how you words repeated in my head*

*over and over again torturing me.*

*Why do you dress like a bum?*

*The terrace is coming. She might have a bomb.*

*Lonely, I cried in the darkened nights.*

*Lonely, I stayed in the corners of the class,*

*listening to your giggles and your lies.*

*Pulling off my head scarf, you failed. How many tries?*

*You pointed at me and criticized, looking at me*

*as if I am your doll and characterized.*

*Thinking that you're wise*

*Thinking that you and your friends will rise,*

*but trust me you are not wise.*

*Because maybe you're next in the line*

*To be criticized and characterized.*

*Sink in the red river of your heart and  
swim in the oceans of your eyes.*

*And at night you alone will listen to your cries*

*And you alone will listen to your cries.'*

That was basically it. Thank you!

**Ms. Merch:** Fabulous. Faiza, that's fabulous. I hope you never stop writing poetry. You won't, will you?

**Faiza:** No. No.

People immigrate to the US every day for the same reason my family did, but not everyone who comes here has a better life. I remember the day I heard another girl from Yemen came to our school. I didn't want what happened to me to happen to her, so I took her under my wing. Me and Khadijah became best friends. Her father and brother owned a bodega and I will never forget the day I heard the terrible news.

**Newscaster:** What you see here is happening just moments before the suspects shoot and kill 50-year-old Muhammad Mansour Abuzaid and his 18-year-old son Abdul, two men who own this bodega on Utica Avenue: immigrants from Yemen working seven days a week to support their family.

**Anthony Herbert:** [in a television clip] This family came here to get a better life from another country, and sacrificed to get this business. And then to turn around and have somebody who's ignorant enough not to respect that life to take their life! We're not going to tolerate that in our community.

**Faiza:** Khadija and her family didn't want to live here without her father and brother, so they moved back to Yemen. Whenever I feel lost or sad I go to the mosque and pray.

[Music]

Imam Shaif Abdul-Mami was a great support to me and my family, and always has great wisdom to share.

**Imam Shaif Abdul-Mami:** I believe the bravest American in this country is the Muslim Tahajib—the Muslim woman—who wears the hijab, because she is out front. She is identifiable; there is no hiding. I, on the other hand, or men in general... Our dress requirements are less.

**Faiza:** Is there a specific experience that you faced that was very difficult to you in terms of discrimination? It could be to you, or to your children.

**Imam Shaif Abdul-Mami:** I remember, 1969, I was part of the first group that was bussed from Harlem—in Spanish Harlem—to the affluent East Side, as they call it. My first exposure to being in a predominantly white classroom was at that time. So we found that of course we had better books, better service, better lunch food, better everything! And this kind of confirmed that, you know, there was a very blatant and systemized racism against African Americans. I had a friend I'll never forget. His name was Greg, he lived on Park Avenue. I lived in the projects, so you know, the disparity was... But I was his best friend. He made the social faux pas of inviting me to come home, but he didn't inform his parents. So 'guess who's coming to dinner?' So I go and, you know, we come into the house and I meet his father and he was kind of surprised. But as I'm 15 years old, 14... You're not looking for that. The next day in class our teacher would ask us always, you know, what we did. She got around to Greg and he had this real despondent look on

his face, and said, 'well I invited him over to my house.' She says, 'oh, so how was that?' He said, 'after he left my father washed everything he sat and touched.' I, I could not believe that. The whole class went completely hush, my teacher—her name was Judith Gaby—she started crying. And I'm, and you know, I was like why would he do that? And then he kicked in like 'oh!' and I never forgot that.

My grandfather—full-blooded Cherokee—was born in Cherokee land, and my paternal side is African American, so having gone through the African-American experience growing up here, and then the Muslim experience, I was kind of... Kind of more prepared than most Muslims. First you wonder if they're rejecting you because you're African-American, then you wonder if they reject you because you're Muslim, so after a while you have to move beyond that. My advice to the younger generation is there is always going to be a small percentage of the population that makes these superficial judgments, and you have to learn to negotiate those, and to not work around them in all situations, but to work through them. And by working through them I mean you have to challenge them, and have the courage to do so.

**Faiza:** Even though I went through hard times, it only made me stronger. I went to a great high school where all the students speak English as their second language. I didn't want others to go through what I did, so I started conducting workshops about bullying and racism.

What if there's a gang and then you're alone. I mean do you still think that fighting is like... I understand. I, I get your point, I really get your point! If you could say it verbally, with not going too far... if you could just run away, away from it—not run away like you're scared, no, just trying to... I mean, sometimes it's a better way to protect yourself. You can have a different opinion!

**Male Student:** I was in this situation. Like, I went to Harlem one day, and I saw a gang. Some gang members staying down there, and when I was passing, they said a lot of stuff to me that I was just ignoring because there were too many. And then also you know that, they got—you see the cane that the old people use to walk with?—yes, they're young, and they got all this, you know that's some kind of weapon they have. If you do something they will hit you with it so I just be like 'let me be mute and not listen to nothing. Let me just walk and not look where they are.' And I just walked like all over to my uncle's house, and I just do my stuff, and went back they cursed me and said bad stuff. Curse my mother or whatever. I just ignore it.

**Female Student:** My Mom always told me that you, you cannot be like that. Because they're gonna try to burden you. They're gonna take you, you're kind of weak. And I was like okay, I'm not gonna fight with nobody, and then... Yes. People come to bully me. I just go and I tell Mom and Dad I'm not really, I'm not gonna be the same, I'm not gonna put myself the same label as you. I always say that.

**Faiza:** That's true! High five!

**Workshop Advisor:** When I was little, I grew up in Indiana. My parents were newly immigrated and in Indiana there were not many faces that looked like mine. Most of the kids that I grew up with were white. But I never really realized the difference between me and other kids because when you're a kid you don't really get the differences, right? And you get differences like, 'oh her hair is different', you know, 'her eyes are different', but you don't understand racism. But I remember that it was first grade and I was in my classroom, and one of the students was like

'what's that smell?' It was like, I tried to smell too... What is that smell? When I realized that it was me I totally cried. I went home and I cried and the days that followed. I remember that I actually brought different clothes to change into so I wouldn't smell like Indian food. And I just thought to myself my gosh! Now as an adult when I think back to that I think, 'wow you know what? Those words affected me so much!' If we think of those stories that we had as children that made us who we are today, I think that that will help us monitor what we say and how we say it to other people.

[Chatter]

[Students singing *Imagine* by John Lennon]

**Faiza:** We did this workshop. Each paper crane has a message, so it's like another way of spreading their peace to the world.

Thank you!

**Workshop Participant 1:** I will write peace on your wings, and you will fly all over the world.

**Workshop Participant 2:** If you want people to respect you, you have to respect, too.

**Workshop Participant 3:** Love, respect, peace doesn't cost money.

**Workshop Participant 4:** Health[y] and happiness!

**Faiza:** Thank you!

**Workshop Participant 5:** respect is the first thing for everyone.

**Faiza:** Thank you!

New York is an amazing city and I'm so happy to be living here. My family and I are doing great. My mom graduated from English class, and even helps others with their English now! I graduated high school and am now studying to be a doctor in college.

Making this film has been a great experience. I was so lucky and honored to have Albert Maysles, the great filmmaker, be my mentor. He invited me to watch a documentary on bullying at his institute and hang out afterwards.

**Albert Maysles:** Growing up in Boston as a Jewish kid at George's Day, I suffered a lot from bullying by Irish kids who were extremely anti-semitic. And in fact, not a day would go by when I wouldn't be accosted by an Irish kid. We both raised a fist and got into a fist fight, and one of those fist fights—which seemed to be just another, another fight in which neither one of us would really get hurt—but we pounded each other because it was fists. And as I left, I walked through the crowd of Jewish kids and Irish kids who were watching the fight. I saw this little kid and took a hold of his hand and walked him home as my brother. But he was already crying, and cried all the way home.

Speaking of love, for the first time, I knew exactly how much love you had. I'm thinking of a lecture Margaret Mead gave, and at the very end of the lecture, she made this very strong point

that just about the most important thing is that we find common ground with one another. Common ground with people of different backgrounds of all sorts—economic, social, nationalities, whatever—and in finding common ground, less opportunity for conflict, more opportunities to get along and find the pleasure in really knowing, and therefore loving thy neighbor.

**Faiza:** This was a poem I wrote. It's something that I feel very passionate about, and that I wrote it because that reminded me of me back in middle school, and all the hate that I realized in our world so...

*'Lately I realized that so many people care about my identity  
and I wonder why do they care so much about my race  
whether it's black, brown, white, or even burgundy.  
And how could it possibly just lead to slavery.  
I hear whispers behind my back saying isn't she Asian?  
Well I know for sure she's too white to be African  
the other would say but I turn around and show them my bravery.  
Because I don't want them to think too hard.  
I want to stop their curiosity by saying I'm sorry but you both are wrong.  
My race is humanity.  
They wonder which religion do I follow—  
whether it's Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, or Christianity—  
but don't you know we have a lot of similarity?  
Such as the creation of Adam or the story of the Virgin Mary.  
Well if you're still wondering because of my head scarf, yes.  
I'm a proud muslim but that doesn't mean I have no respect for other beliefs  
or a bit of quality because I believe in equality.  
They wonder where did I came from,  
Whether it's Yemen, Lebanon, Iraq, The DR, or any other country.  
This time I looked them in the eye and said brothers and sisters,  
I guess that were you all forgotten that we all from our Mother Earth*



*that is carrying you and me until one of them said disappointedly,*  
*'Well I'm sick and tired of listening to your nonsense.*  
*Wake up this is no dream this is reality in fact there's no such thing as equality.'*  
*Well what can I say to you? You need to study the struggle of liberty,*  
*go back to history, know what is it like to be in a time of slavery*  
*where slaves were being killed the women were used without a heart or mercy.*  
*Time of starvation where you're hungry, you're thirsty stomach is ripping apart,*  
*it's completely empty in a time of war. You see the depth of your family*  
*where babies are breastfeeding fear and war is their only design destiny,*  
*where they're learning to dance in the rhythm of the bullets because*  
*they're forced to mark it as their number one priority.*  
*Now learn the mystery.*  
*Be part of the peaceful community.*  
*Because I'm not ignorant.*  
*I believe in change and equality.'*  
[Credits roll]