

Ten Million Souls Transcript:

"We Are Millennials"

Arielle G: Hello and welcome to the Harrisonburg 360 Podcast. I am Arielle Gick.

Kara M: And I am Kara Myers. And we are your hosts for today's podcast.

Arielle G: The Harrisonburg 360 Podcast is an attempt to capture and record narratives of immigrants living in the Harrisonburg community. Using past and present voices of Harrisonburg immigrants, students in our JMU English class have collaborated to create a space focused on the importance of listening to each other's voices.

Kara M: Every person deserves a chance to share their story, and we, as a class, are privileged to share these stories with you in hopes of expanding perceptions of what it means to be an immigrant in Harrisonburg.

"Affection"

Arielle G: Each week, Harrisonburg 360 is produced by a different team of students. This week's episode, Ten Million Souls, was produced by Emily Baker, Kara Myers, myself, and Madie White. There are 44 million immigrants in the United States. In this week's episode, we took the time to follow the lives of two: Nasser Al Saadun and Ana Arias and look at the different effects that trauma and violence have on people. These effects come in different forms, whether it is war violence, or culture shock. What stories hide behind the faces you pass on the streets?

Kara M: When we interviewed Ana, she was a wealth of information and kept us on our toes throughout the interview. She told us about living in the Amazon jungle in Brazil and moving to the US, along with the amazing anecdotes about her father.

Arielle G: When we reached the end of the interview as we were packing up, Ana laughed and told us that she had completely forgotten to tell us about her experiences during the Noriega invasion. We immediately had her sit back down and tell us about it.

Kara M: But, when we looked back at the way she talked about the experiences that were most difficult for her, we noticed that even though the Noriega invasion was significantly violent, the culture shock of coming to the United States seemed to be a more harrowing experience for her. But we'll get to her story in a bit.

"Affection"

Arielle G: This first story is from the Special Collections at James Madison University. Special Collections is dedicated to preserving the history of the Shenandoah Valley. One medium that they collect is oral histories of immigrants in the community. The interview we will focus on in this segment is between interviewer Daniel Brennan and interviewee Nasser Al Saadun. Conducted in 2009, Brennan and Al Saadun discuss his traumatic past in Iraq.

Kara M: To give context, Al Saadun was in Iraq in 2003 during the start of the Iraq War, when the United States first invaded Iraq. Operation Iraqi Freedom was a part of George W. Bush's "War on Terror." Saadun faced terror by the Iraqi government because of his knowledge of English, and his role as a translator for the British government.

Nasser Al Saadun Audio:

NA: "As I have experience in English I worked for the British army as an interpreter, then I worked with the United States, with the US Army. And for that reason the militia kidnapped my father and tried to chase me, because anyone there working with the US Army was killed. You know, would be killed by the enemy militia. And so after kidnapping my father they killed him, so we couldn't stay there. I took everyone in my family and we moved to Syria and from Syria to Lebanon."

Arielle G: For Nasser, the Iraq War meant losing both his father and his home. After moving to Syria and Lebanon, he was able to come to the United States, where he could reflect on the events of the war. In this next segment, Nasser describes the events surrounding the United States removing troops from Iraq between 2008 and 2011, and the result of Iran beginning to assert its influence over Iraq.

Nasser Al Saadun Audio:

NA: At the beginning actually it was bad at the beginning, it was very bad. And they didn't have any strategy for occupying Iraq. They came, they won, then after that they didn't expect that to happen, not that fast. So it was like a mess, a disaster, for all of the people. Also for the US Army because of the many killing soldiers, so both sides it was a disaster. Then after that Iran came with the militia and the need for the US was very high, because they are the only people that can defeat Iran. The militia was very bad, they were killing people for nothing, so the only way to destroy the militia was by the US forces. At the beginning the US supported the people who supported Iran. That's the truth actually, then they notice that those people are not honest and they changed their plan. And now they are doing good, but in case of a fast withdrawal it will be bad for us, as maybe Iran will come in.

Kara M: This violence trauma that Nasser Al Saadun faced was a profound experience that deeply shaped the rest of his life and his outlook on the world as well as the war that he lived through- the story that he was able to tell.

Nasser Al Saadun Audio:

NA: Because when you help a person, anybody, you expect that he will help you. In return. That's something normal, if I help you this time you'll help me next time. So when I came here and say that there was no help, nothing, no one would ask about you. I said that I lost my father because of working with the US army, and I said I didn't care because my work was to help people, to translate, to see people, the needs. And so in return the US must help us.

NA: Imagine that if you have these situations. How are you feeling from the influence of these bad situations? You would definitely be in a bad mood, maybe you'll hate people, maybe feel regret for the days you spent working with the British or the US. Still I have friends, officers, soldiers, insurgents, Americans because I worked with and they loved me and we made friendship, but when we came here those people in the refugee's office were very bad. Very, very bad, they did not listen; sometimes they asked us, "Why did you come here?" Yeah, yeah, I did not imagine that someone would ask me, because the government agreed to bring us here. So why did this people ask us "why we came here? Why did you expect to come here?"

“Affection”

Arielle G: Our second story of the day comes from an interview between myself and Ana Arias, where we discussed Ana’s journey and life in America. Much like Nasser, she lived in countries with turbulent political climates. She came to the United States to get her degree in counseling and is currently an active member of the Harrisonburg community. In 1970, Manuel Noriega was recruited by the United States government to help the US in their fight against the “spread of communism in Central America.” However, during the initial invasion, the majority of the US presence in Panama was removed and Noriega’s forces were working in a guerrilla style militia. Ana’s family was living in Panama at the time of the invasion.

Ana Arias Audio:

AA: ...He worked for the Pan-American Health Organization, which was part of you know, the World Health Organization. So we stayed there and he was actually on a trip when warfare broke out in the street. So, one day we were at school, and they barricaded the school And so my mom couldn't get to us. And so we had to go into the gym. And I remember this because it was like a middle, older elementary middle school, and they just had hard boiled eggs and popcorn to feed us. It was so gross and it smelled so bad. And I was there with my younger siblings and my older brother. And everybody was super scared because we had to be quiet and you could hear the gunshots outside, and they had barricaded it so my mom couldn't reach us. And so a lot of families turned around and went back and the kids were stuck there overnight. But my mom refused to. And so she sat there and sat there and sat there until a guard let her through, picked us up and we went home to which we all hid under the bed because there was warfare out in our street and we didn't want stray bullets to come in and hit us. So we stayed under the bed and we listened to the gunshots. They were pulling people over because it was guerrilla warfare, and the militia was in charge and so they would pull people over And sometimes just assassinate them. And so one of my father's friends was pulled over and assassinated. And he was still trying to get back into Panama. And my mom's like, probably pissed off at him, I would imagine because she's like, I'm stuck in this country that's in the middle of a civil war, and you're not here. And so we were afraid to go anywhere. And there was one time that we were in the car. I don't remember where we were going or coming from, but we got pulled over by guerrilla warfare.

And they had big big guns, and they searched our car but we had our dog with us. And the dog was like barking barking, barking barking, like going crazy. And I thought, Okay, this is going to help us or the dogs gonna get shot. But the militia guys, I think we're afraid of the dog and let us go. So we were able to go home and go through that and the funny thing is, is I never coded that as traumatic. It was just like something I went through. So later as, as an adult [and] I'm going through therapy for different things. I was telling the story of like, Oh yeah, I was there during the Noriega invasion. I remember hiding under the bed. I remember my dad's friend got pulled over and like, assassinated and shot in the head. And my therapist is, like you said, didn't have a trauma history. And I'm like I don't. She's like you were in a war. And I'm like, oh, ha, yeah. Yeah. Because I remember like, people running around big machine guns, like constantly being like, Oh, we better hide. But I just didn't think that was a big deal. So finally, my dad came back [and] packed us all up, and that's [why] we moved back to Brazil. That's how we ended up back in Brazil.

"Affection"

Kara M: Ana talks about her time in Panama during the invasion as something that happened to her but not something that affected her life as drastically as it did for Saadun. For example, I was rear-ended, which was super scary, but that didn't affect my will or need to drive. During Ana's interview, she focuses more on her time in Santa Barbara, where she experienced trauma.

Arielle G: Ana was in Santa Barbara for the first two years of college. For most of her life, she lived in the Brazilian rainforest with her family because her father was an entomologist. The transition from homelife to college was difficult for her because of the culture shock she experienced.

Ana Arias Audio:

AA: Okay. I first came to the United States for college. So I first came to [the] United States when I was 17. And I came to California. And I did two years of undergrad in Santa Barbara. At a little school called Westmont College, literally, like we didn't know anything about the United States. And so we had my parents get this catalog of Christian colleges in the States because they thought that'd be nice and safe. So we looked through and we picked the pretty ones like we just were like, and I was the first to go. So I was like, Well, my mom's from California. Maybe I belong there. So I picked like the prettiest one in the catalog ended up in Santa

Barbara, which if you know anything about Santa Barbara, it's like really really rich. So I went to school there and was like, Oh, wow. And it was awful. Like culture shock was through the roof because nobody knew where Brazil was, some like, I mean, I was really shocked. They were like, you know, it's that like in Africa and I was like, no, it's no and so I felt really out of place and living. I lived bilingually so switching to only living in one language was really hard on my system. And so I did not there was not a lot of diversity at Westmont College, shockingly.

Kara M: Being a first generation college student, I can see how college in itself can be a type of culture shock.

Arielle G: What were the most shocking or unexpected aspects of college for you?

Kara M: Coming from a very small town in southwest virginia, where our graduating class was under a hundred, I experienced the same kind of culture shock because of the amount of people on campus. I had to fit in within such a large community compared to back home. Also, the bus system on and off campus is super confusing. I still have yet to ride the bus.

Arielle G: I feel you, I always get mixed up with the bus routes. I think Ana went through something similar. She describes not being prepared for the experience of an American college.

Ana Arias Audio:

AA: So I went to the counselor at the school and was Like, I am struggling with culture shock. You know this, my parents did their best to prepare me for the United States, but my mom was a hippie in the 70s. So my cultural references were not up to date. So people were like talking about Ben and Jerry, I asked who they were and what dorm they lived in because they were so popular [and] did not know it was ice cream. So even though I sound and look like I could totally blend, I people were all I think they thought I was dumb. And then I felt really dumb. Because I didn't get any of the cultural references, which a lot of it was about like Dukes of Hazzard and stuff that, you know, people who are now middle aged, when they were in college, that's what they talked about, and I just didn't, it's like I was playing a game but no one explained the rules to me. And I looked like I should know the rules. And so [and] my cultural cues were all wrong. So in Brazil, When you talk to someone, you're you hold on to them like, and you touch them, and you kiss them when you first meet them. So you

meet someone, you kiss them three times, and you get really close, like my space bubble was wrong. So very quickly, all the guys on campus thought I was a whore. And we're asking, like, really inappropriate things of me. And I was like, what, like, horrified, but because I was giving off the totally wrong clues. And so I got depressed. And after two years, and the counselors like, couldn't figure it out, they're like, just take some medicine. I'm like, No, no, I'm pretty sure I'm having culture shock. And they're like, no, that's not that's not it. And I'm like, No, yeah, I'm pretty sure and I couldn't go home on the breaks because [it's] too far. So I was kind of stuck.

Kara M: Al Saadun and Arias both lived through violent times in their own countries. Nasser lost a family member and was forced to flee his home for safety. Ana describes being in a situation where she understood that there was a possibility she could die. Their experiences differ in the way that they reacted to the trauma that they faced. Arias conveys the violence she faced by the invasion, trivial in comparison to her trauma from culture shock. On the other hand, Al Saadun's life was changed due to the violence he experienced.

Arielle G: Time plays a huge role in the significance of these two people's traumas. Ana was at a young age when she experienced the invasion, and Nasser was an adult when he was forced to flee Iraq. While Nasser's interview in 2009 reflected negative views of his experience coming to the United States, a recent op-ed in The Daily News Record, "Support Office of New Americans," he describes his experiences differently. He says, quote, "After two long years as refugees in Lebanon, we were selected for resettlement to the United States -- a miracle that less than 1% of refugees ever receive. I've called Harrisonburg, Virginia, home ever since."

Kara M: Al Saadun is writing in support of a new Office of New Americans that would assist in refugee and immigrant integration. While his outlook is positive, he still explains his difficulty with culture shock. Quote; "My wife and I knew going through the citizenship application process wouldn't be easy, but it was something that was important to us. Having some guidance during the process would have been invaluable, and I know that future generations will benefit immensely from it if the ONA is established"

Arielle G: For Ana, the alienation she felt coming to America and not knowing the cultural references or the nonverbal cues that Americans use seem to have been more difficult for her than living through the violence of Noriega's invasion.

"Affection"

Kara M: When we first met Ana, we would have had no clue that she lived in the Amazon Rainforest. And had we just passed her in the street, I don't think we would have guessed that she was an immigrant. When we listened to Nasser's story, we had no idea that he was a professor at JMU.

Kara M: After listening to both of these extraordinary stories, we want to leave you with some thoughts to keep in mind.

Arielle G: Our title, Ten Million Souls, comes from the poem *Refugee Blues* by W.H. Auden. As we said earlier, there are 44 million immigrants in the United States, you never know what someone has been through, or where they've come from. We hope that after listening, you will be reminded to always be kind to everyone, even faces you don't know that you pass on the streets.

Kara M: We also hope this reminds you to take the time and learn about the stories behind the faces you often see throughout your community. Just like we did when we interviewed Ana, and listened to Nasser's story from Special Collections. Both of these people are highly successful individuals though when you look at them, you would never guess they had a traumatic past.

Arielle G: Thank you for joining us today on Harrisonburg 360. We're grateful to Ana Arias, Nasser Al Saadun, all the people from JMU Special Collections, especially Kirsten Mloy-dean-ya, Kate Morris, Sarah Roth-Mullet and Bodeene Amyot, and Dr. Fagan for helping make this episode possible. Be sure to follow us on instagram @harrisonburg360 and twitter @360harrisonburg or check out the #harrisonburg360

Kara M: Our hosts today were Arielle Gick and myself. Our interview with Ana Arias was conducted by Arielle Gick. Our research and content producers were myself and Madie White and our audio producer was Emily Baker. Join us next time for another episode of the Harrisonburg 360 Podcast.

Tagline: Harrisonburg 360. Real people. Real stories. One community.

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