

Dalia

Dalia Farag, 52, Principal Application Engineer, Egyptian

“I came here when I was 15 to go to high school. I lived with my uncle in San Diego, and then stayed for three years. I went back to Egypt to go to American University in Cairo [where I became a computer science major]. After that, I worked a government job where [I worked] with the Egyptian social security card; I was a programmer. [Regardless,] my plan was to come back here; I couldn't originally stay [because college was expensive] and my uncle couldn't adopt me when I was in America, so I wanted to try and come back. [I had already felt] more American than Egyptian. At the time, it was really difficult to come here in 1992, 93. There were no jobs. As I was working in Egypt, I started looking into other things.

I began looking into immigrating to Canada, where at the time, it was easier than coming here. Right before that, I started thinking about [wearing] the hijab. I don't know why — [I suppose] there were two guys that were very religious in my office, and they started talking to me about it, but I don't think it was them. I think it was me, I started feeling that, you know, it was the right thing to do. But I was worried because I was going to Canada; how was I supposed to find a job with a hijab? I remember talking to another guy from work and I was saying, ‘I'm really worried about wearing it because I'm leaving for Canada, and I'm worried about my job search.’ So he told me to just put it on, and if it's really hard to find a job, then to take it off. I thought, ‘That's a good idea. Why not?’ So I put it on in 1997.

I ended up going to Canada, but I went to Montreal, which is [a] French speaking [territory]. And actually in Montreal, everybody was wearing it, I didn't feel weird at all. But I did have trouble finding a job, [and it wasn't because of the hijab] but because I didn't speak French. And in my heart, I still wanted to be in America. I didn't want to be in Canada. My other uncle in America ended up offering me a job, and I began to work on paperwork. I talked to the immigration lawyer and I told him I wasn't happy in Canada. ‘Should I stay and wait for the paperwork in Canada, or go back to Egypt?’ He told me here or there, it didn't matter.

I decided to go back to Egypt. While I was there, this guy that I used to work with in the government called me and told me he got a new job, and [eventually mentioned] that they were hiring. [It was for Kaiser Permanente in America], and I got an interview. When I met the [hiring manager, who is Egyptian], he really liked me. I don't know why, I guess it was the hijab. I really believe it was. I hadn't worked in six months, and he didn't ask me any technical questions. He also didn't ask for a technical interview. [Years later], and I'm still at the same job.

I think the hijab has done great things for me. [I don't view the hijab negatively at all]; on the contrary, I think it brought me good things. Protected, I think it protected me. I gave up some things, and I think it's the ultimate sacrifice. And I think when I did it, so many things started happening for me. I really have a lot of respect for the people that do it young. I mean, everybody should do it at their own pace, of course. But for me right now, I do believe that all of us should do it. And I think it protects you.

I never felt that it was suffocating me. Allah helps you. If you make this decision, and you ask Allah to help you, you get that. We're even starting to get [more and more] representation. [Especially with] Kaiser, you would see pictures of hijabis for health care and it's becoming more widespread.”