

Fahad al-Sultan
Salam for Cultural Communication Foundation
Presenting Razan Alaqil
Córdoba, 15th May 2019

Good evening.

Thank you, Jacques, and thank you Assaad. That was really an inspiring story and I think this is an example that maybe we can benefit from and, I am sure, through all this conference and Forum, we will learn a lot. On behalf of Salam for Cultural Communication Foundation I would like to welcome all of you and take the opportunity to thank the Cordoba Forum for giving us the opportunity to be a part of this great event. We, at Salam, are delighted to collaborate with the Cordoba Forum and we look forward to strengthening the partnership and collaboration between Salam and the Cordoba Forum and contributing together to building peace and intercultural coexistence.

I am here today to introduce a young lady from Saudi Arabia. Her name is Razan Alaqil. At the age of 16 she had to travel to the United States as part of High School exchange programme and because of her passion to create a positive change, Razan was active in participating and volunteering opportunities by engaging with the local community in the US, giving presentations in schools about Saudi and Muslim culture, sharing with the students some commonalities between cultures. She had played a good role in changing the negative image and stereotypes about Muslims.

After graduating from High School in the US, Razan returned to Northern Carolina to pursue her bachelor's degree in Political Science and Global Studies. Razan also was active at the United Nation level, through the UN Youth Assembly and the UN Economic and Social Council Youth Forum promoting youth involvement at such high and global level. At the UN Youth Assembly, she won the Outstanding Youth Delegate Award. So tonight, she is going to talk about her experience and journey in the United States, and her efforts to engage with the local community, and to create coexistence with their community.

Please welcome Razan Alaqil.

Razan Alaqil:

Thank you, Dr Fahad, for the introduction.

Salam Alaykum. The human nature of upbringing. Wherever we are in the world, in any country or region, every child is brought up by parents who they care for. We all grow up with a story of some sort. Our aspirations, our dreams, our accomplishments are all somehow one way or another connected to how we all grow up and the environment we have around us.

Back home in Saudi, we believe that the young generation is all part of a bigger, larger, a national message which binds us all together. It is the message of the dreams and aspirations that our parents and their parents, and every generation in Saudi had and nurtured in all of us. I say this knowing that most Saudis share this bond of commitment for the future. And today I am privileged to be standing here, in front of all of you, to share with you my story of my upbringing and how it is linked to our Saudi identity, and what we pride to share the world with. Things like cultural exchange, volunteering and the simple concept of peacebuilding through dialogue.

My name is Razan and I am 21 years old. I come from this small town in the Eastern province of Saudi Arabia. We have a population of about 1.000.000 people. I recently graduated from the United States with a degree in Political Science and a minor in Global Studies. That is me right now, but allow me to take us all back a few years.

In 2014, at the age of 16, I decided to travel alone to the United States, which was part of an exchange programme called the Kennedy-Lugar Youth Exchange and Study (YES). This programme was created by the American Congress and the State Department after the events of 9/11 to bring in young Muslims and Arabs to study in American High Schools and live with an American family and be part of an American community as much as possible through presentations and through community service.

During my early days in the US, I was hosted in a small town called Marion, in North Carolina, which has a population of only 8.000 people, so compared to where I come from, my small town of 1.000.000, Marion was pretty small. I went to a school, which had only 600 students; Marion had only one High School, and in that small community, all knew each other some way or another. I was recognised everywhere I went; I believe I was the only person with a hijab in that town at that time. So, wherever I went I was easily recognised, and they all knew I wasn't from there, and they would say "that's the exchange student from Saudi Arabia". So, during my early days in Marion, sometimes I was unfortunately negatively criticised by other people. But that was actually something that encouraged me to meet more people, to get to know them better, to have them know more, not only about Saudi Arabia, but also about our region, in the Middle East, also about Arabs, and also about Islam in general. I was literally an ambassador every single day, not only because of who I am or where I come from but because of the hijab that I had on my head. So instead of saying "hi" whenever meeting someone, I would say "salam". "Salam" literally translates as "peace". Those interactions and that simple "salam" made me continually reminded of a hadith by Prophet Muhammad, may peace be upon Him, when he said, "You will not enter paradise until you believe. You will not believe until you love each other. Shall I show you something that, if you did, you will love each other? Spread peace among you."

“Spread peace between yourselves”, that was always something that I kept in mind, because aside from our cultures, our religions, our regions, all those borders, we are all humans first.

After a few weeks of moving into Marion and settling down, I met our next-door neighbour, whose name was Mr Price. Mr Price is 95 years old, well he was 95, by this time he must be 98-99, and I was 16, so there were over 75 years of age gap between the two of us. Nonetheless, I enjoyed going to his house and chatting with him every time we were walking in the neighbourhood, and he would always sit on his chair and watch everyone go by, and watch all the dogs and give them treats. With my host family, I learned to bake the famous American cookies and make an amazing American staple. Mr Price loved cookies, so every time we baked some, I would take some warm ones to his house and we would always talk with each other about, basically, everything. We spoke about Saudi Arabia, about the US, about World War I and II, because he fought in both, we spoke about the whole world, but our conversation was never political, it was conversation in the purest of all forms. We were there exchanging cultures; we were there exchanging dialogue. We didn't want anything from one another. All we wanted was to enjoy this shared conversation that we had between one another. Later on in those years, I realised this was not just any conversation; this was us doing dialogue in the most amazing of all forms. We were two people from completely different cultures, completely different religions. He was born way ahead of time for me. We exchanged ideas; we exchanged history, exchanged culture.

Those conversations, despite how simple they were, they were very dear to me, and they were really meaningful during my experience in the States, because I knew that whatever I needed, I could go talk to Mr Price, with cookies or not, ask for his advice while also enjoying his company.

During the holidays, I enjoyed volunteering. So, my host family has this tradition of volunteering during Thanksgiving and packing meals for people in the community. With them, I went to pack meals during Thanksgiving morning, and every single Thanksgiving for over 4 years. During my first time going to the centre where we would pack all those meals, I was introduced to someone named Mr Samir. Now, that name really rang a bell in my head, and I was like “a Mr Samir in Marion? Wait! That's an Arabic name, that's a Muslim name. I need to meet him.” So, Mr Samir actually comes to me, and he says: “Salaam alaykum”. And I look at him like “Oh my God, you are Muslim” and he is like “Yes, yes I am”. So, it turns out that Mr Samir and his family moved to Marion a few years back from India and they opened a few gas stations in Marion and in towns nearby, and they've been committed to donating meals to people in the community every single Thanksgiving. And when I say “meals” I don't mean hundreds, I mean thousands and thousands of meals every single year. But thousands of meals need a lot of people to pack them, right? So basically, we would stand in this huge assembly line, some of us in the centre halls and some of us in the kitchen, cooking casserole, turkey, mashed potatoes, all the Southern staples, you name it. We all stood together, like one body,

all working towards one common goal: we wanted to benefit the community. It was Muslims and Christians all together enjoying that early morning, not for anything other than us offering our time and giving from our joy and our family time to help people in need, and us also going to deliver those meals to people on their doorsteps.

Marion, that small town, that I thought did not accept me or my religion when I first moved there because of the negative comments I had, truly surprised me when I saw diversity and inclusion in its most beautiful forms when we came together in holiday that unified all of us, when a Muslim donated thousands of meals to a Christian community. Now that's peace, now that's coexisting, now that is a lesson that taught me so much at that young age and that is why I kept on going over and over again throughout all these years.

So, through my years in the US, over 5 years between High School and College, I was inspired by people around me to do more and give more and more. And it just grew in me to have a greater impact, not only in my local community either in the US or in Saudi Arabia, but also globally. That is why I became a Saudi Youth representative to the United Nations. I got to be involved with the UN's Youth Assembly and the United Nations Economic and Social Council, reflecting the voices of all young people in the world, and particularly in Saudi, it meant that I carried a message of youth involvement in dialogue, for also decision-making at that level. We needed increased dialogue with mutual understanding. The tools to engaging with the world are many and the UN is one of them, where we have the opportunity to be part of a larger, universal message for young people and all people around the world.

Five months ago, I moved back to Saudi after living in the United States for five years. So much has changed between the ages of 16 and 21. I, myself, have changed. All those lessons I learned, all those people I met, all of those encounters, all of those experiences, those volunteering hours; all of these things shaped me into becoming the person I am today, but also one thing still stays the same, and that is the continuous drive to be part of the development which benefits everyone. And that's not only me. I have that passion and I have that enthusiasm, which you mentioned earlier, because we are all enthusiastic together, we are all inspired together, and we can all develop and change when we do it together.

So, two weeks after settling back home, I received a call from Salam for Cultural Communication and its Youth Leadership Programme, which is a programme in Saudi, that encourages young people from all around the world to engage in dialogue. That phone call was to ask me to join one of their upcoming events, which was Salam Stories. Salam Stories was a platform where young people and adults came together, from different backgrounds and different experiences, to share their cultures. So, basically it was in Saudi Arabia, but out of all of the speakers, there were only two Saudis, which brings me to my next point. During that event, a person started their talk by saying "mingalaba"; she said it over and over again, "mingalaba", and she walked all around that stage saying "mingalaba". So that really triggered

something in me and that really made me extra focus on her talk. It turns out that “mingalaba” means “hello” or “a blessing” in Myanmar, and that truly reminded me of me saying “salam” in the US, and not just “hello”. This person was in Bangladesh, for a relief trip for the Rohingya people. Last week I was with this person, where she led a group of professional and medical volunteers to the Zaatari camp (Jordan) where we volunteered for a whole week for our Syrian brothers and sisters. I am also here with this person, whose name is Shams Alsaby, who continuously inspires me with her drive, passion, and commitment to, literally, travel the world in the service of other people. She’s travelled to Bangladesh, she’s travelled to Jordan, and she continues to travel and volunteer for other people with her message of peace for everybody. That’s Shams over there (applause).

Today we are all witnessing great representations of Saudi women around the Kingdom and also around the world. But how does that all fit into our talk today? So, the thing is, for both, Shams and myself, we come from backgrounds where, at home, we are raised by the ethics and morals of a peaceful community, and a religion that calls for peace, and that values the importance of dialogue, mutual understanding and the exchange of cultures. The two of us would sometimes just sit around and talk how our fathers would teach us to travel the world and just be global citizens. And that’s one of the best conversations that you may want to join. That is why we may be at this event; I mean this is why we met at that event. And that is why we continue to meet, because of our passion to keep on being in the service of other people.

Through all of these experiences we continue to meet great Saudi youth, one of them is Abdulaziz Alasakir, who is also here with us today. So Abdulaziz has a lot of experience in facilitating dialogue, but also being part of communication in large groups, and he is also a graduate of the Salam Ambassadors Programme, which is part of the Salam Cultural Programme in Saudi Arabia. We all continue to promote for these values in our work of Youth representation whether it’s me, being here talking to you, whether it is Shams being in a refugee camp, whether it is Abdulaziz facilitating dialogue and changing groups. Our love for giving and our passion for dialogue brought us, myself, Shams, Abdulaziz and all of us and all of you here today, together, in one place. We literally travelled the world to be here. That is because we built on our friendships through work, volunteering, and the exchange of cultures that fulfils our hearts. We are all a reflection of the youth of our countries, all the youth here in the room, all we have been doing for the past two days, and we are surely a reflection of the upbringing that our parents have nurtured in us. And every civilisation, every culture, and every country have witnessed over the past two years a sense that it is truly remarkable, we are all so different, yet we are all super similar at the same time in the reason that brought us here. Like us, many families are the same with the upbringing of their children, and as we begin every conversation in the world wherever we go, with “hello”, “hola”, “mingalaba”, or “salam”, we all remain true to the beauty of dialogue and peace.

Shukran. Salam alaykum.