Jenna: This is Jenna Corso interviewing Nala Isic on October 21, 2016 at Benedictine University as part of the Benedictine University Interfaith Oral History Project. Nala, where did you grow up?

Nala: The first two years of my life I spent in Bosnia, which is where I was born. That was in the 90’s, so I’m gonna date myself here, and during that time, there was actually a war in what is former Yugoslavia, now. So my parents fled to Germany, so for the next 8 or 9 years I lived in Germany, Luveria. After we overstay our welcome, we were told that we had to leave because we were war refugees. We would never be allowed to own any land. We wouldn’t be granted German citizen status, so we had a choice to go to Canada, Australia, or the United States. My parents were really young at that point—they were in their mid-twenties, so they saw a lot of opportunity for work and to give my brother and I a better education. We also had friends and family in Chicago, so we decided to come here.

J: So when you grew up in Germany, or you had your first major childhood experiences in Germany, what was that like?

N: It was really difficult in the beginning. My earliest memory of going to school in Germany was being rejected by my classmates because I wasn’t a German and because I was Muslim, so that was really hard. But then, as I went on to grade school and middle school and I made friends who were also Muslim or they were Chinese or whatever the situation was, then it got a lot easier and it was just like your regular childhood.

J: And then when you came to America, was it difficult to adjust?

N: No. The only difficulty was learning the language, but because the schools here are already so diverse, I [found people] to be really accepting. They didn’t care where I came from, what my skin color was, or what religion I was. As long as I was cool and they could play with me and we got along, that’s all that really mattered.

J: How would you describe your ethnic/cultural background? Do you identify strictly as Bosnian, or as American, or a mix of Bosnian, German, American?

N: This is actually really difficult for me because my parents are first generation here—no, they’re not first generation if they weren’t born here. How does that work?

J: Yeah, they’re not.

N: No.

J: They’re just considered immigrants.

N: Just immigrants.
J: Yeah, they would be considered immigrants. Then you’re first generation born.

N: No, I wasn’t born here, so I wouldn’t be first generation.

J: No, that’s right.

NJ: *Both laughing.*

N: Okay so because my parents are kind of old school even though they’re really young, and I think they’re homesick, too, so they try to push us to adopt Bosnian traditions and speak Bosnian more at home. I don’t really want to or like to do any of that, and there’s people here on campus who are Bosnian and they can tell I’m Bosnian by my name, and they’ll ask me like, they’ll start speaking to me in Bosnian and I’ll just be like “I don’t what you’re saying. I don’t speak Bosnian.” I just don’t want to deal with it. I don’t like the Bosnian culture, I don’t like the way the people are, and I’ve never really felt like I was German. To me, that was somewhere that I lived. I never really felt like I was one, and now that I’m here, I just love the American culture, so I identify as an American, only.

J: What is it about the Bosnian culture that you don’t like?

N: A lot. The Bosnians—a majority of them—it’s a very underdeveloped country, still. They’re still largely affected by the war, which was twenty-some years ago. A lot of Bosnians live on farms—self-sustaining—and small villages. They don’t really, they’re not really educated like we are here. They don’t push their kids to be educated, and they like to act like they know everything when they really know nothing about anything. They’re very gossipy, very judgmental, racist, sexist people, and I’ve found that when I try to share my views with them, they don’t want to accept it. Like they can’t see the other side. They only see what they want to see, and they think things are the way they see them in their head and how they view them.

J: How would you describe your religious beliefs?

N: Well, I was born into a Muslim family. My parents never pushed religion on us. In the beginning, a little bit, they just wanted us to know how to pray, learn a couple prayers, and what Islam was about, and we still largely celebrate holidays. We don’t fast, so I don’t think we’re technically true Muslims. We’re not very religious. We do have a Christmas tree, but it’s not for Christmas. It’s for New Year’s only because it’s really pretty. Other than that, I don’t go to mosque. I don’t pray. I like some aspects of Islam, but I’m also learning by going to other places of worship and just taking more religious classes that there are parts of other religions that I really identify with, that I like, and I try to incorporate them into my life. So that’s definitely been a struggle.

J: So what is it that you’re struggling with? Is it the belief in God, or is it more of which religion you think is true?
N: A little bit of both. So, Christianity was built on Judaism, and then Islam came after that, and Islam recognizes and acknowledges Jesus as being a prophet. So, I don’t understand how all of that can be true, you know, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, if Islam acknowledges all of the prophets that came before, so I don’t understand how that works. I don’t know how to explain it.

J: So are you sure that there’s a God, though, or do you still struggle with the idea that God exists?

N: I like the idea of there being a God because I can’t even being to explain how we came here—and why the world is like it is and who created it, you know, like the Big Bang just seems like a sci-fi, like a fantasy where I can’t even—I don’t believe that that happened. So I do believe there’s a creator, but because we can’t see Him or Her, I don’t know.

J: So, then, what kind of holidays do you celebrate?

N: We celebrate the traditional Muslim holidays—Eid, Ramadan, even though we don’t fast, but we just abstain from things that we would normally eat or drink during Ramadan.

J: How about Christmas or New Year’s or Easter?

N: No. No other holidays, but like I said, we do put up a Christ—I don’t want to call it a Christmas tree—a New Year’s tree for New Year’s that we decorate and make it really pretty, and when we were growing up, my mom would put presents under it for us. This last year, we had an Easter egg hunt because my aunt is married to a Greek Orthodox man. We celebrate his holidays, too—well, not really celebrate; we just attend the dinners and the lunches. We’re just there in support. But we had an Easter egg hunt which was really interesting because they were filled with money, so that was really nice. So I guess those are the only holidays that we really celebrate.

J: Did you trick-or-treat when you were a kid?

N: Yes

J: Okay, so Halloween, too.

N: Oh, that is a holiday, you’re right! And Valentine’s Day. Can’t forget that one.

J: And which one is your favorite? You would say it’s New Year’s?

N: It is New Year’s. I just like the idea of starting fresh, having a clean plate, and just make the year what you want it to be, and just forget everything that happened in the past and try to be better.
J: Do you make a list, then, of New Year’s resolutions? Do you have a party at midnight and all that?

N: I did when I was younger, but now that I’m older, I just kind of like staying inside because it’s so cold. Watching the fireworks out my window. I don’t make a list of resolutions because I know I won’t make them. You know, like, “Oh, yeah, I wanna do this this year,” but it doesn’t happen, usually.

J: How does your family celebrate marriage, or how would you celebrate marriage?

N: Well so far, no one in my family has gotten married, but I attended my aunt’s wedding in Bosnia a couple years ago, and the way they did it is the groom’s side of the family, like the cousin or the brother or whoever, would come to my grandma’s house and they would steal the bride. So they took my aunt and they drove her to the groom’s house and that’s where they got married. There was an imam there—the local imam—and he married them. My grandma didn’t come. So my aunt’s mother, she wasn’t allowed to come, which was really stupid. So the other side of my aunt’s family was able to come, so our cousins and her aunt’s and stuff. Everyone but her mother, and they just sat in a room together, and they had cake and coffee and they were just able to meet each other, get to know on another.

J: Then is there a celebration that comes before or after that where everybody is involved? All family members?

N: No.

J: There isn’t?

N: No, they just come and take the bride away, and that’s it.

J: So the bride’s family is excluded, or just her mom?

N: Just the mom. That’s so sad.

J: I’d expect that it is.

N: I want my mom to be there!

J: What traditions do you have for when a family member or a close friend dies?

N: I haven’t really had anyone die yet, thank God. I think the tradition in Islam is to clean the body and wrap it in a white shroud, and then I bury them. I think there’s someone who’s not allowed to come, right? Women? Women aren’t allowed to come?
J: Yeah, for the burial.

N: Yeah. So, I don’t really know how we would do it here. I think we would just regular. I don’t think we’d do it the Muslim way.

J: You think you would do the embalming and the viewing?

N: Probably. Well, maybe not so much the viewing. I think it would be a little difficult, I think, to see my loved one. But I think we would just bury them regularly in a casket.

J: Do you belong to a religious organization or community?

N: So the only religious organization that I belong to is the interfaith club here at Benedictine called MOSAIC.

J: And what do you guys do?

N: We try to educate the students and the faculty about other religions and just try to break some of the stereotypes, especially about Muslims, that you see in the media. Next week we’re doing an interfaith week where every day we’re having discussions between certain religions or we have leaders from different religious communities come and give talks and presentations. And then on one day we’re gonna have a lunch consisting of faculty and students of different religions just coming together and sitting down and answering questions about each others’ religion.

J: So what made you interested in joining MOSAIC?

N: What really peaked my interested was, actually before I came to Benedictine, I went to COD and took a world religions class because it was a requirement, and I was just like, “Ugh, this is gonna be so stupid,” like, “Who cares?” You know, I wasn’t really interested in any of that. I just wanted to get it over with. But I had a really great professor, and I was excelling in the subject. It was really interesting. I was learning new things that I didn’t know about my own religion, as well as others. He actually is an alum from here, and he made Benedictine sound so great, and when I came to visit here they were pushing diversity and how Muslims are accepted. All this and that, so when I came here, I took more religious classes, and the more I took them, the more I was interested. And I wanted to kind of be a warrior for interfaith and learning about each others religion and respecting it being a peaceful campus and community.

J: Did you do that because you were interested in—because you don’t really know what you identify with? Is that why you felt that?

N: I think that’s probably a large part of it. It’s like I want to be involved and I want people to learn and understand and be respectful of each others’ religion, but like you said, I don’t really identify as anything, so it’s probably a big search for me.
J: So why is it that you feel that you don’t identify with any religion? Is it because you don’t really know much about Islam, or is it because you feel like you’ve researched and asked questions—or have you?

N: It’s not that I’m not knowledgable about Islam. I’ve taken a lot of classes and talked to a lot of people about Islam and other religions, but in the 90’s, like I said, there was a war, and this community of people who were living together peacefully for so long—I don’t know what happened—but the Bosnian Muslims were being slaughtered and tortured, and it was just awful. And I think just from my own parents being persecuted for their beliefs—I just didn’t understand why that happened, why God would let it happen to his own people and why didn’t he stop it?

J: You said that you’ve talked to Muslims on campus and that you’ve done a lot of reading and research, so what kind of questions do you have that you ask people when you’re trying to figure something out?

N: That’s a good question. Rephrase that—like asking them why did God let this happen? Like those kind of questions?

J: Or just in general. When you talk to Muslims on campus, what do you guys talk about? Are you asking them questions? Are you trying to figure out what they believe, or are you just having casual conversation?

N: It’ll just be a casual conversation. I’ve found that if I ask someone, like I’ll ask my parents. My parents aren’t very religious people, but I’ll ask them like, “Mom, why is it like this?” She’ll just kinda beat around the bush. I don’t know why. I don’t if it’s like she’s maybe uncomfortable or she doesn’t know. This is a really hard question for me.

J: So you feel like you’re not getting the answers that you need.

N: Yeah.

J: Or that the answers that you’re getting are not sufficient.

N: Yes. I think like if I had physical proof or just something that I could see with my own eyes, then maybe I would believe more.

J: What is it that you think would convince you? Something that you could see with your own eyes.

N: I don’t know. Largely—okay, this is what I struggle with the most: When religion first became popular—like with Judaism, right?—the Prophets had all these signs: the water parted, or the bush lit on fire, or this thing talked, or Jesus converted water into wine, all these miracles, and it’s been so long since the Prophet Muhammad that we haven’t had anything after, like no
more word from God. I just don’t understand. All these prophets were getting messages and things in such a short period of time, and now it’s been thousands of years and we’ve heard nothing.

J: Yeah, you feel like it’s an abrupt ending.

N: Yeah.

J: Like why aren’t we still getting signs and still getting miracles?

N: Right, so I’m just like, “Is it because we’re terrible people, or is it because there’s nothing there?” So I can’t decide if maybe these prophets were making things up as they went along just to become powerful leaders or because these things actually did happen?

J: I see. Have you ever have a disagreement with a family member or someone close to you about religion?

N: My uncle is Greek Orthodox, and he actually, when my dad was held prisoner in a camp during the war for being Muslim, my uncle helped him escape, so that was like a huge thing. But, surprisingly, my dad and my uncle don’t really get along because my uncle is Greek Orthodox, and he’s a Serbian. So when we get together for holidays or whatever, they’ll start talking about the war and why it happened, or whatever, and they’re always blaming one another. They’ll start arguing. And a lot of it has to do with religion, obviously, but both sides don’t really know what they’re talking about, and with me, having taken so many classes, I try to explain to them why they’re wrong and why it’s this way over that way, and they just don’t want to accept it. They don’t want to be told that they were wrong. They just wanna think what they think, so it does get really heated some times to the point where I just have to leave because I don’t wanna deal with it.

J: What kind of disagreements have you had, or have you had with them? Have you ever talked to someone in your family about religion and you guys got into an argument?

N: Not really. When I was telling my mom why I went to a Catholic church and what I really liked about it, she was really upset. She thought that I was trying to convert or that I shouldn’t believe in Christian things, but she didn’t really understand what could be beautiful about a different religion. So it’s like those kinds of arguments. Any time I go somewhere and I learn something about a religion, I get really excited. I share a lot of things with my mom, but she doesn't understand. I don’t think she wants to understand, so it’s just really hard to talk without arguing.

J: What did religion mean to you as a child? Do you remember being religious as a child? Did you go to the mosque? Did you guys celebrate holidays even as a child? What was that like for you?
N: I did go to the mosque, and we had to learn how to pray and things like that. But for the most part, just holidays and being Muslim just meant presents for me, like on Eid. I’ve never really fasted or done anything like that. I’ve never worn a hijab, so religion wasn’t really like a huge thing, it was just cool on the holidays when I got gifts, so that was nice. It was never really forced on us, and I think a large part of that is because of what my parents went through, and I think they’re just afraid that Muslims are gonna be targeted again, which they are, so my parents never forced me to wear a hijab or do any of that because they don’t want me to go through what they did.

J: So if you were to start a family today, say you had kids, and they were going to ask you about religion, what would you tell them?

N: Well, I think it would just depend on who I married. Like my aunt was a Muslim, married a Greek Orthodox man, and they have a daughter, and she’s married as well and she has a kid, and she grew up kind of going to both mosque and church, and now she’s neither. She doesn’t associate or identify with either one of those. And she’s raising her child kind of as nothing.

J: And you feel like you would do that, too?

N: I think so. For a long time, I dated a Serbian guy, and he was Greek Orthodox, and that was really hard on my family. They kind of shunned me, and I was the black sheep of the family. They didn’t want anything to do with me because they were so upset. I didn’t see anything wrong with it, but I don’t know. I think it would just depend on who I married, what religion they were. As far as raising my kid, I would just teach them a little bit about every religion and just let them decide what they thought was true for themselves.

J: So you’re open to marrying someone from any religious background.

N: I am. My family isn’t, I mean, I was just dating someone and they were really upset over that, but I don’t really care.

J: Is there anything that you think you’d want to add?

N: Yeah, just that I’m really terrible at this. *Laughs.*