

RAY H INTERVIEW

Geri: (11:46:52:03) Name and title?

Ray: (11:46:53:08) I'm going to plead the Fifth Amendment. I'm going to take the fifth. Actually my name is Ray Hannanea. I'm a syndicated columnist and I'm a stand up comedian. And some people think that's both the same, but I don't.

Geri: (11:47:07:00) Is the comedian part post 9/11?

Ray: (11:47:10:10) Yes, it is.

Geri: (11:47:11:15) Why is that?

Ray: (11:47:12:00) More on stage post 9/11. I mean, as a journalist, you always use humor. Humor's very effective in terms of communicating. But after September 11th there was so much ignorance that I couldn't believe people were saying things to me like—I had a woman come up to me and say, "I can't believe you abandoned your Christian faith to become an Arab." And I had a guy send me an email saying that he was going to kill me. And he put his name and his address on the email and it turned out to be a neighbor down the street from me. And that makes you wonder—Can you write a column that changes their minds or educates them? And I don't think you can. So I think that's when I decided that you know I think humor—we have to take humor to another level to something we don't do very well as Arabs. Comedy is very satire, you know, its social satire. We use humor to address the tough issues. You know Americans do it, Jews do it, Italians, Asians, everybody. But for some reason Arabs don't really use stand up comedy that well. It's really a new phenomenon. There's humor in the Arab world but not stand-up comedy.

Geri: (11:48:26:00) Tell us about your first career, your first title of being a columnist, you were with the Chicago Sun Times, is that right?

Ray: (11:48:34:20) I was with the Sun Times. I covered Chicago City Hall almost 18 years. And I got into journalism because all my cousins, and uncles and relatives are doctors. A couple of them are engineers. Only one doctor failed and became a dentist but you know how it is, you know, black sheep of the family. I was supposed to be a doctor. And I just for some reason—I during the 1973 war, I recognized that Arabs were not doing a very good job of communicating. And I made this dumb decision to go into journalism. I became very successful, but sometimes I wonder if I would have been a better—you know I should have gone into medicine. But as a journalist I thought, you know, we need to tell people who we are. We're not doing a very good job of doing that, we don't communicate, and we talk to ourselves very well. We talk about our problems, you know people don't want to hear about our problems, they want to hear about them. What's important to them. And you can take your story and put it into the context of what's important to them. When you learn how to do it, it's amazing how people respond to the writing. I did very well as a journalist for a number of years. Up until September 11th, I would say...got to be a little hairy...

Geri: (11:49:49:21) Last year you won a best national ethnic columnist. Tell us about that. What's an "ethnic columnist"?

Ray: (11:50:00:00) I don't know. You know what's interesting about it—you know, it's a great honor because you have this media association that deals with cultural and ethnic issues. Read some of my columns and said, "Wow! These are great!" And I think it was that being an Arab using humor to talk about serious issues was so unique, they felt it stood out. But ever since I've been a journalist, everybody's always said, "Well, you're an Arab American journalist." And I go, "No, I'm an American." And they go, "Yeah, but you're an Arab American." And they don't seem to say that if you're a Jewish American journalist or an Irish American journalist or an Italian. You can write about your culture—nobody pegs you. But if your Arab and you even mention your culture. Even if—I think I did five columns in 20 years of journalism about being Arab. Suddenly I became pegged as this Arab American journalist. And you know, on the one hand, it was nice because there wasn't very many Arab American journalists in the United States.

Geri: (11:51:00:25) Who's doing the pegging?

Ray: (11:51:02:10) Editors, you know, the public, readers. You get labeled, like it's easy to label Arabs as outsiders. "You're not American, you're Arab." And it's because like again, I feel we don't do a good job with telling the public who we are. We don't get them to feel comfortable about us, knowing about us. So I think communications and humor really changes that. I think it really changes the dynamic. If you can get somebody to laugh with you, you can live with them, or you can understand. Laughing is so personal. I use humor in writing all the time. My best columns are ones where you start out with an anecdote or a joke and then you get to a serious subject. Or you kind of balance off the serious subject with some humor. Readers love that, especially in the west. And in the Middle East it's tough though. They really don't like humor in the context of serious issues.

(*Brief interruption/Break*)

Geri: (11:53:30:15) Is there anything else you wanted to say regarding your segues?

Ray: (11:53:37:00) Sorry. No, I just think it's very different for Arab Americans in this country, mainly because we don't communicate with Americans very well. We don't tell our story. People see us as strangers and I think that that's a challenge that a lot of us face. For me it was going into journalism and comedy.

Geri: (11:54:04:00) In addition to inserting humor into...What advice could you give journalists, especially young journalists who are covering the Arab American community?

Ray: (11:54:15:15) Well, I think you need to be more educated about the community. And it's very hard because the Arab community is very diverse. There are 22 different Arab countries. You know, when you say the word Arab it sounds so monolithic but the truth is we're very different. And understanding those differences can explain the political challenges that they might be writing about. The differences in religion, too. I mean being Muslim, being secular, being more conservative, being Islamic activists or political activists, being—there's people who don't even understand the fundamental differences about us. And until you do, it's hard to cover us as a community.

Geri: (11:55:02:25) So you mentioned that there was an ignorance after September 11th. Now were you talking ignorance in just print media or is it just all media?

Ray: (11:55:16:10) Well, umm, I think Americans are the most educated people in the world, and the least educated about the world. And I think that's reflected in how the media covers stories. The more complicated a story the more I think audiences are patronized. The Middle East is a very complicated story and I don't think the media does a very good job. Take for example the Middle East is probably the number one story we face today, right? Terrorism, the Middle East. Yet you can look at 450,000 newspapers and count on two hands the number of Arab Americans who are writing columns. Who are helping the media understand the topic they are writing about. For some reason we feel we're not engaged in the media, you know, professionally. We have an Arab Journalism Association and there's a big discussion about diversity in the media. The media doesn't want us to be a part of that discussion. They're comfortable with the "Big Four"—Blacks, Hispanics, Asians, Native Americans. When we started our association the Native American journalists criticized us—saying the we took their acronym—AJA. And to me it was like, "Wow! Is that what the issue really is." And we have a hard time getting included. We're still on the outside and I think that that gap causes problems for everybody.

Geri: (11:56:49:10) You were one of the founding members. Tell us about how that was?

Ray: (11:56:53:20) Well, like I said, I've been a journalist since 1976. In 1999 we decided to found a journalism association where we would try to encourage more young Arab Americans to be professional journalists. As opposed to this trend that I was seeing where we would see a lot of Arab Americans use journalism as an activist tool. In other words what they really weren't journalists, they were trying to use writing to promote a cause, which I think is good but that's not really journalism. Journalism is about focusing on the truth even when it hurts. You know, write about it, be accurate. Because if you really believe in something the truth is going to help you. You don't have to exaggerate anything, you don't have to spin something. So telling young Arab Americans that becoming journalists doesn't mean advocating for Palestine or Lebanon, it's advocating for truth. And understanding the system, becoming part of the system. And once your at the table you can bring your community into it. And we've seen the number of Arab American journalists in the United States probably increase from maybe about 40 in 1999 to about 150 today. And it's good to see that. Real journalism, professional journalists as opposed to activist writers and columnists with an agenda.

Geri: (11:58:17:20) And activists writers--those are the bloggers?

Ray: (11:58:20:00) Bloggers and you know, you'll see a group of a —whenever there's a bombing or an event newspapers will reach out to a leader in the Arab community and ask, "Will you tell us about this event." They're viewed as, in our community, they're the most frequently published people in the Arab community. To me they're not journalists, to me they're activists. They're engaged in the news. What we need are Arabs who step out of the news, cover the news professionally so that our story is actually included in the larger narrative of news that's published, broadcast on radio or TV.

Geri: (11:59:03:00) So in AJA, are most of the members are they print journalists, TV?

Ray: (11:59:08:10) I would say probably 80% of our members are print. We have a number of Arab Americans that are in broadcast journalists. We have some famous ones...Egyptian Americans, Muslim, who works with Dateline NBC, very proud to be Arab. He was one of our speakers at one of our events a few months ago. Jim Avala, who's father is Lebanese and his mother is Hispanic. He's very proud of his Lebanese culture. He's very active when he comes to events in Chicago or around the country. And Anthony Shadeed, who won the Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Iraq. Pat was amazing. He probably was the first Arab American to win a Pulitzer Prize and that was a turning point for us I think. For me it was Watergate. You know, watching Watergate on TV in the '70s kind of moved me to be like Woodward and Bernstein. I wanted to be a journalist rather than a doctor. So you know Arabs need a role model like that, Arab Americans, and I think Anthony Shadeed is a great role model.

Geri: (12:00:19:23) Since you've seen an increase in numbers, do you think that's parallel to or a reflection of news organizations? Are they actively recruiting?

Ray: (12:00:32:00) Well, no not really, that's an interesting point. I mean, that's really perspective of you to pick on that because what we're seeing is more Arab Americans getting into journalism, wanting to be journalists, but not getting jobs. Freelancing, maybe working with the local ethnic American, Arab American paper, being interns. But they're not really penetrating—we're not breaking into the profession. There's still this resistance to let us in. People in journalism see us and the go, "Oh, Arab." Right away they think politics. They don't go, "Oh, Italian, we don't care who you are, just be a good journalist." Arab—the very first day I was hired as a journalist I was told to keep my views on my side of the typewriter. You know, it's okay, I'll do that. And then I went on to win several awards for the newspaper. But they never light up. It's like, "Ray you're going to ruin your career by being an Arab journalist. Why do you want to write about the Middle East?" Because sharing that experience helps people understand the story better.

Geri: (12:01:40:10) Could you tell us about your background?

Ray: (12:01:43:20) Sure. Well, I was born in the United States. My mother's from Bethlehem. My father's from Jerusalem. We're Christian Arabs—Orthodox Christian. I was raised Lutheran because they didn't have an orthodox church when we lived in Chicago. A lot of my relatives are doctors, store owners, engineers—my brother's an engineer. I served in the Vietnam War in 1972, '73, '74. My brother was a Marine. My dad and uncle served in World War II. So you know we're really part of—I like to really think of myself as really being American. But you know I realized later on that it wasn't going to be that easy just staying in that system so it kind of influenced my decision not to go into medicine and go into journalism. I knew it was a really good choice but I loved journalism, it just changes things. But I started in journalism in 1976. I worked for a community paper. I went on to become the city hall reporter for the Chicago Sun Times, I stayed there until 1992. I did a little media relations and government relations to learn the other side of the coin, so to speak. And for six years I've been syndicating a column on the Middle East and Chicago politics. I kind of do the two. And lately I've been doing more humor columns for Israeli and Arab papers in the Middle East.

Geri: (12:03:18:00) And can I ask a personal question?

Ray: (12:03:20:00) Sure.

Geri: (12:03:20:15) How did you meet your wife? And from what I've found, it did mention that she's Jewish

Ray: (12:03:27:00) Right, and my wife is Jewish. And we didn't meet--

Geri: (12:03:30:00) Your first wife.

Ray: (12:03:31:00) Oh, well, my first wife was British-Jamaican. I have a lot of relatives in Jamaica. I was very young. She was a great woman. We had a daughter together. Hypha, she's 29 years old now. The marriage didn't last because I think I was just too young and brain-dead for a while there in college. I got married a second time. I almost got married a third time. And now people are amazed, they go, "Wow! Your first wife was British-Jamaican. Your second wife is Irish, your third almost wife is the city treasurer of Chicago. She was Puerto Rican. And in 1993 I met Allison. And she's Jewish and I'm Palestinian. So you'd think we'd have nothing in common, but the amazing thing is we have everything in common. We both know about the Middle East. Jewish and Arab culture are really almost parallel. We love the same food. I don't like the Phelta fish that much, but we do enjoy the same food. But it's amazing how much we get along. And it just works, it's great.

Geri: (12:04:39:00) And she's a journalist as well?

Ray: (12:04:41:00) No, she's was in government service. She was an elected official of Cicero for a number of years, which is a tough place to be as an elected official. And as someone who's Jewish. But the toughest problem we have is she's a Republican and I'm a Democrat. Those are usually our biggest fights. So it is, it's an odd relationship. I use it in my humor because people are astonished that a Palestinian and a Jew can be married. And we'll be celebrating 10 years in a few months.

Geri: (12:05:12:00) It also mentions here that you've been tapped by the US State Department to provide media training sessions.

Ray: (12:05:21:00) During between leaving journalism in 1992 and coming back to it in 1999 I was invited to provide journalism training programs for young journalists in the West Bank in Palestine. And we would set up satellite television sessions, and they were through the State Department to just talk to them about professional journalism. You know, they're living a war zone. They're actually living the conflict so there's a tendency to allow some of that emotion to come out in your writing. Let the passion come out in your writing but you don't want the emotion to come out in your writing. You still want to do your best to be a journalist. So we talked about how do you keep your personal feelings from driving the story. In other words, would you interview an Israeli politician? A lot of Arab journalists won't, it's considered taboo. And I said, "As a journalist, you should want to then want to then want to do it." I would love to interview the prime minister of Israel as a journalist. Because it's not done as an Arab. You know, doing to me what's not done needs to be done in journalism. So I try to explain, that was part of our training. Teaching them to understand it's not about saying you support Israel or your taking sides. But you want to get the story. And if you're going to get the story you have to talk to people whether you like them or not. I've interviewed some really

ugly people. I had to interview the John Wayne Gacy murder of 10 thousand children on the north side of Chicago. I had to cover a lot of killers and when you sit and talk to them, they sound like nice people. You know you hate this person, but you know, the idea is to get their story out. So I try to get Palestinian journalists, who I think have a tougher challenge in the conflict. They could get shot anytime, not even because they're journalists, just because they're Arabs. They could be involved in some violence around them or near them or a relative. It must be really tough to separate being a good journalist and keeping your private life outside your writing.

Geri: (12:07:45:00) At the same time, you're known as an outspoken critic of violence and advocate peaceful Palestine and Israel. Where is the line between being an advocate and being an objective journalist?

Ray: (12:08:03:20) Well, it's been tough, especially since September 11th, it's been very hard to find work as a journalists. I find work as a freelance writer for several newspapers. But I really don't have a full-time career the way I did before September 11th. So you have to supplement your income, and all I know is media and communications. Some people think, "Wow! How can you be both?" I'm not trying to tell people how to develop strategy. What I'm trying to tell them is understanding the process of communications. Some of my activism in the Arab community has not been to say, "Okay, this is what you should say." It's "you need to understand that communications is a process. Today there was a panel where someone on the panel said, you know, there's someone on the panel that said, "You know, we have this great organization and nobody from the *San Francisco Chronicle* will cover us." And I asked them, "Do you even understand—do you have somebody that does public relations? Do you have a budget for public relations? Do you know how to do a press release? Do you even understand how the news media is structured?" If you don't even understand those things, the only time you're going to get covered is when it's for a negative story, when the media wants to cover you. So a lot of the "activism" is to promote an understanding of communications and also—I feel personally compelled to speak out against violence. It does no good. There's no good aspect to it. there's no glory in suicide bombing. There's no—there's nothing good about using violence. Even when you're fighting with someone. The best thing to do is end the violence and figure out a way to resolve it. So I felt very strongly speaking out against suicide bombings when they started in 1994. And I got involved with the Palestinian-American community. I was elected national president of the community based organization, The Palestinian American Congress. And I was very open. I said, "I'm not going to support any kind of violence." And I got the overwhelming support of the community. So to me it tells me that this idea that the Palestinians are supportive of violence—deep down I don't think they are. I really think that they're against it—emotion confuses things.

Geri: (12:10:27:20) Now has your activism impacted them? Is that what I'm sensing here? Because in your journalism career you have...an opinion? Is that a problem with news organizations?

Ray: (12:10:44:00) No because most of them want me to write a column. They wanted me to be objective. I'm a columnist, and that's a lot different than being a journalist. And I think that really for the first 25 years of journalism I was a reporter. These last ten years I would say I'm pretty much a columnist—an opinion writer—I tell people what I

think. I still try to present what I believe is a balanced portrayal. You know, a reasoned look at an issue. So being a columnist there's no such thing as objectivity. They want subjective views, but they want it to be informed commentary.

Geri: (12:11:24:00) And it said here you participated in a meeting with Clinton and Israeli and Palestinian officials towards strengthening that Muslim peace talk.

Ray: (12:11:32:15) Right between the time I left journalism and came back, president Clinton invited a number of Palestinians—I don't know, maybe about a dozen of us to the White House to meet with Rabeen and Arafat and talk to them about ways to promote a peace process. And I learned a lot. I think it benefited me as a journalist. I think every journalist for at least two years should leave the ivory tower and protection of journalism. When you're a journalist you have these great protections. I had then when I covered city hall. I could write anything I wanted and people were afraid to take me on because they knew I covered city hall. You need to be on the other side of the fish bowl. Looking at the reporters and realizing—it gives you a really good perspective on the things that journalists can do better. How easy it is to think that you cover celebrities, you're a celebrity. No, you're just a reporter of celebrities. They're the ones with the millions of dollars. You still go home to a sixty thousand, maybe seventy thousand a year salary. You think you're someone when you're not. So I think it was a good experience for me to step out of journalism and get into the activism side, understand government relations. I even ran for office just to see what it was like. And I think coming back into journalism, it's given me a better depth in terms of politics—which I still cover for a couple papers in Chicago.

Geri: (12:13:06:00) And so what are you going to talk about tonight?

Ray: (12:13:12:00) Well, tonight is about stand up comedy and the power of humor. And I'm going to help the Arab American community—it's this crusade I've been on the last almost five years now—to get them to understand that humor is very powerful. Probably more powerful than a mean statement. You know, I could say something mean about President Bush, but people don't react the same way if you make a joke about him. That joke can really get people to understand the point you're trying to make. Especially if it has a point. So the stand up comedy is really new in my community and it's been picking up. There's really only a couple dozen, really at the most, Arab American comedians. But I think there should be more. I think we should use humor to make our political statements. I think we should use humor to rip apart discrimination and bias and bigotry. I mean, Jews used it to deal with anti-Semitism. I think we can use it in the sane way. Because when someone says something so stupid as to, "Why did I abandon my Christian faith because I'm an Arab?" I can't sit there and I write a column to lecture her—she's never going to change. But for the most part, people who feel that way, most of them are just confused, not educated and they won't listen to you. So you grab their attention—humor will do that. You grab their attention, not everybody will like you even with a great joke. But a lot of people will come up after a comedy show and ask you, "Wow! You guys are just like us." And once they've said that, you've won. You've actually become part of the system you're trying to enter.

Bob: (12:14:54:00) What do you poke fun at?

Ray: (12:14:56:17) ...There's different kinds of humor obviously—self-deprecating humor, social satire, cultural humor. I get up and talk about what it's like to be Arab American growing up in America. And one of my classic jokes is that, you know, I would go to school—and these are all true stories—I go to school and after the '67 war kids would come up and say, “Wow! What are you?” “Well, I'm an American.” And they're like, “No, you're not.” And I go, “Yeah, I am!” And they go, “No, you're not!” And I talk to my dad, and I go, “Dad, what am I?” and he said, “God, don't tell them you're Palestinian. Tell them your Syrian or Lebanese.” Now back in the '60s it was okay to be Syrian or Lebanese, I don't know about today. so I went back to school, the kids surrounded me, I think they were going to beat me up. And they said, “What are you?” And I said, “Well, I'm cereal but I think my mother's a lesbian.” And I just wasn't quite sure. So you know I do jokes like that to talk about: “Wow!” And that story is the same story that everybody tells in their own different ethnic ways. Every ethnic group goes through the same thing. And when you share it like that people immediately identify with it. and then I talked about being married to my wife, whose Jewish. And I play at all the political angles, all the different buzzwords I work them in, and very funny. I don't make fun of violence, obviously. And I don't make fun of religion but I do make fun of the things that drive people to violence—the anger the circumstances, the leaders, the lack of leadership—things like that.

Bob: (12:16:44:00) What's going on inside your head when you're telling those jokes?

Ray: (12:16:49:10) Well, being Arab I don't really think about what people think about me anymore. You know, I've had a lot of nasty things said about me over the years and it doesn't bother me. And being in journalism—that's the other side—if you get into government, you learn to have a tough skin. So you really kind of learn both sides. So in my head I'm pretty much look for an effective way to get somebody to understand stupid things. Silly things that people believe—Why do they believe that? If it told them, “What you believe is wrong.” They wouldn't believe me. But if make a joke about it and show them how silly it is to be that way, it really has an impact.

Bob: (12:17:38:00) Is your humor dark?

Ray: (12:17:41:15) Not really, the humor is pretty upbeat. Sometimes they'll ask me to give a serious discussion and I'll mix it. and then I will talk about the ‘fourteen people are murdered after September 11th because they look Middle Eastern.’ And nobody cares about them. Everybody brushes them off like “Oh yeah, well one guy was killed because he was dating the killer's ex-girlfriend. But the killer said when he was arrested, “Yeah, I was mad at him for stealing my girlfriend. But after September 11th I knew that that S-O-B had to die.” September 11th pushed people to do terrible things. So in more serious discussions I'll get into that dark side a little bit.

Bob: (12:18:28:00) Are you aware of the demonstrations that took place here in Dearborn last year when the Israelis and Hezbollah were going' at it?

Ray: (12:18:43:00) Sure. Yeah, I was familiar with it. I mean this is America. It's free speech. I think people should be allowed to say whatever they want. Frankly, I don't buy the whole line about Hezbollah being hundred percent a terrorist organization. Just as I don't buy the line that all Israelis are trying to kill Palestinians for their land. There's a middle ground. So I think the demonstrations in Dearborn had a lot to do with emotion.

You know, the unfairness that we had to had to hear. I'm not even Lebanese, but as an Arab I immediately identified with Lebanese who are watching really the United States take an active role in helping fight a war against Lebanon. Instead of wanting to bring the war to a close they said, "No, no, no, let's let the Israelis beat the crap out of the Lebanese a little but longer. Don't allow the UN to discuss these." I could see how a community could become very angry with that and rise up and protest. And allow their anger to get out of hand, you know, it's normal. People need to vent. And if you cant vent, if you cant express yourselves in the media, if you feel shut out of society sometimes, you're going to do it in ways that are just not pretty. Which is part of my argument that I think the media should open its doors to allow more Arab Americans to participate. Allow us into government. I live in Chicago, we have 250 thousand Arabs, but we don't have one elected official in the city. Why? Because of us? I mean, as soon as they found out you're an Arab, no one will vote for you. We've seen it, it's just horrible. I think discrimination is a big issue. I think it impacts how people react. That anger that you guys—that people saw in Dearborn during the Israeli-Lebanese War I think was a reflection of that anger in the community over the unfairness of the way people are treated in this country.

Geri: (12:20:44:00) But if we can laugh together, we can make it through.

Ray: (12:20:48:00) If we can laugh together, we can live together. It's my mantra...By the way President Bush says that his party, the Republican Party, is the party of God. Where I come from that is called Hezbollah so I think that somebody should point that out to him. All right how was that? Did that help?

(*Laughter*)

Bob: (12:21:08:00) That's great. We are taping him tonight and then another—

Ray: (12:21:17:00) Yeah, absolutely, I don't mind at all.

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