

Rania Matar Interview

Geri: 00:05:05;24 Tell us about you growing up in Lebanon.

Rania: 00:05:08;00 Well, basically I was 11 when the war started and when things were really bad my parents would go to, we went to, I went to school in France and then I would come back to Lebanon so I would always kind of come back.

Geri: 00:05:31;05 You studied to become an Architect?

Rania: 00:05:32;28 Yes I studied by architectural studies at the American University of Beirut and then things got really bad in '84 and the war really started to effect life itself in Beirut pretty bad and then I transferred to Cornell to finish my architectural studies there. And I've been here since.

Geri: 00:05:57;08 When did you start taking pictures?

Rania: 00:06:00;19 I started photography actually much later and I just needed a break from architecture because I was pregnant with my fourth child. I thought it was going to be a temporary break. I wanted to do better pictures of my kids. This was in 2000. Then in 2002 I was in Lebanon for the summer and I went with a cousin of mine to a Palestinian Refugee camp. She was doing a documentary movie about the 20th anniversary about the massacres at the camp. I went in with her and I was shocked that people could live in such bad conditions so close to where I grew up and I didn't even know about it. So I decided to start photographing that. This is when it became a full-time career move I guess and I never went back to architecture.

Geri: 00:06:58;25 How is that possible growing up so close to refugee camps and not being aware?

Rania: (00:07:04;20) Well, in Lebanon, I grew up during a war. So the circle of places that you can go gets very narrow because of the safety issues, so your life takes place in your immediate surroundings. It was just basically a question of not going to anywhere that was not necessary to go to. And the camps were kind of involved during the war so it was not a place to go out of curiosity or anything. It was kind of an off-limit zone at that time.

Geri: 00:07:37;28 There are four-hundred-thousand people in these refugee camps. What does that look like?

Rania: 00:07:45;16 There are 12 camps scattered around Lebanon. Some are right in the outskirts of Beirut, some in the north, and some in the south. Four-hundred-thousand refugees in a country of three and a half million so it's a high percentage and they live in really, really, pretty bad conditions. The camps in the south are actually worse off because they are surrounded and you can only access the camps through a Lebanese Army checkpoint. The ones in the suburb of Beirut, they are kind of more open and people can go in and out. So the conditions are pretty bad. Things got actually worse after September 11, from what I heard because a lot of the people were afraid to send money.

Geri: 00:08:33;18 Because of the fear that it may be connected to terrorism?

Rania: 00:08:38;26 Because it was made very much to believe that if you send any money to anything, any refugee camp then you're sending money to terrorists and that's not the case at all. But people got afraid, especially people who are trying to fit in here and are not trying to call attention to them as Arab Americans or **(screensaver appears)** anything and this is the last thing that they wanted.

Geri: 00:12:22;07 Lets go back to your picture taking. You became a freelance photographer, who are some of your clients?

Rania: 00:12:36;22 I really just, I don't have any, I worked on my own all along, I didn't have any client. I kind of just got passionate about the work. I worked a little bit with _____ in the sense that they helped me with access and I would share images with them in exchange. Then I just kind of built it like that, slowly like that, on my own like that.

Geri: 00:13:01;05 We've talked to people in Metro Detroit about their experiences with media coverage and one of the things that has come up, one of the events is the July War of 2006. As you know, in Metro Detroit, there is a large Lebanese population. You covered, or you went to Lebanon after the July War, what were some of the differences you had seen at that period compared to the time when you had been there, say in 2002?

Rania: 00:13:01;05 I was actually there during the July War as well. I arrived on July 12th, which was the day before the war, and I was actually going to get quite a bit of work done on Lebanon for a book and the next day I woke up and it was a full-fledged war so. I was with my kids and I had just decided to get them out of the country so I came back right after the war. And actually though, when I left the war and I came to the U.S., I was actually pretty horrified by the way the media covered the war. Because the reality I was under was pretty horrible and to come back here and I felt it was kind of covering it almost like, I don't know. It felt like it almost lost the human touch. It was very much showing bombs falling everywhere and I decided to go back after the war and photograph how people are really putting their lives back together. Which, once the war is over, I think the media really forgot about it and this is reality for a lot of people, how the country's getting back on it's feet, how people are dealing with their loses, putting their lives back together, and moving on. And what I saw different was, well, everything was different about it. Before Lebanon was at it's peak and in 2005 was expected to, the tourist season was expected to be, was going to be huge. Lebanon was building itself back up and people were pretty upset. The country has been pretty divided since. I don't know if I answered the question? Is that what you are asking? What I found though was that people were extremely resilient and this was very humbling to see that. I mean everybody welcomed me into their home and let me photograph them and was just so nice and helpful and it was just so shocking after what they have been through people were still willing to do that. And they were really anxious to put their lives back together so one guy who sells shoes started doing it again in the whole middle of the destruction, people moved back into their homes, which were complete or half demolished. So...

Geri: 00:16:04;09 You mentioned they'd been in a Civil War several years ago. So was this something, this resiliency, is it a cultural thing?

Rania: 00:16:13;20 It's not our culture, I think it's habit. I mean we had gone through it before and I mean knowing on Lebanon rebuilds itself it's a very energetic society so people tend to rebuild themselves very quickly. But then again, I was very young during the Civil War and then I left to study in this country so it's kind of, I mean I can see it through different eyes right now after being, after living here for so long. So I cannot quite compare. And the Civil War was quite devastating and it was Lebanese against each other and this was very different, this was Lebanon being attacked by another country. So there was a different dynamic to how people felt about it I guess.

Geri: 00:16:55;24 Tell us about the photograph behind you.

Rania: 00:17:00;27 This was a very interesting moment. I was photographing and this was in Southern Beirut, it's a suburb right outside of Beirut basically, and it was pretty heavily bombed during the Israeli War basically. It has a large Shi'ite population and so I went there when I went to photograph. This is where families would come and wait because you can see in the photo there's a crane and there's a wrecking ball. These buildings were so badly destroyed that there was no way that they were going to be rebuilt or anything. I mean they weren't going to be fixed. So the wrecking ball was destroying the buildings and the people were there, waiting **(audio gets lower)** so that they could go look for their belongings in the rubble. It became a family event because the building was made out of concrete so it took the wrecking ball all day to knock the building down halfway. So people who lived on the upper stories could not go up and get their belongings. They would have to wait for the building to come down to go look through the rubble. And this is what that moment was. In the middle of it was a beautiful moment to see a mother with her daughter kind of looking a different direction than all the destruction behind them.

Geri: 00:18:17;16 Now this picture really speaks to the comment that you made in that _____ . You have a certain irony in your pictures, is that what you're looking for?

Rania: 00:18:44;04 You know, Lebanon is a very schizophrenic country in a lot of ways. It has many religions, many cultural aspects to it, and the irony's there whether you look for it or not. And I think having understood the country as a Lebanese and having lived outside the country a little bit, you could see that a little bit through western eyes. I think you pick up on these ironies quite a bit. So you have it very often in my photos because it exists in Lebanon, the two sides of coin at the same time in a way. Whether it's east and west or modernly dressed women and veiled women next to them or a kind of happiness rising out of the destruction or a girl sitting on a very ornate sofa with a rocket whole above her head. So I think that this exists quite a bit in this society.

Geri: 00:19:40;23 What has been some of the feedback from people who have looked at your photos?

Rania: 00:19:48;18 Pretty positive, which is rewarding in the sense that I'm glad to be able to show people in the Middle East from a different angle a little bit. I tried to focus a little bit on the human side, I mean photographing a war, I think a lot of people photograph a war and you can photograph dead bodies. I think it's important to photograph people kind of rising above

that. And I think it's important for me to show the humanity in the population that a lot of times tend to be misrepresented in the media, I would say. There's always a lot of black and white and I think there's always a lot of shades of grey in people there. So I don't know if that answers it but I don't know if people are responding to it because they're seeing humanity in a different culture or because it's a timely subject or I don't know.

Geri: 00:20:51;05 You would say that these images are truth?

Rania: 00:20:58;16 They are truth. I mean I think they're truth, I think they're truth. I think it's, I'm going to repeat it again because I think it's really important to see the humanity behind people and to see that wars are really something not abstract. I mean now here everyone hears about how many people die in Iraq everyday and it doesn't even mean anything anymore. And I think it's really important, I'm trying to show that these are real human beings who suffered in these wars so I'm trying to get close to the subject, show their facial expressions even if I can.

Geri: 00:21:36;03 What we hope is that this documentary becomes a tool of sorts for students. What advice would you give students who'd like to do this type of work?

Rania: 00:21:50;14 Well, first, it's important work and they should do it. Secondly, they really should go with an open mind because what they expect to see is probably going to be very different from what's going to be there. And in the sense that sometimes you go there to photograph a specific thing but the conditions there move you to photograph a completely different subject but that's okay, because that's how you learn to understand the culture. What advice I would give them is to really try to understand the culture they are getting into because they need to earn the respect and the trust of the people they photograph. I think if they don't do that then the photographs are meaningless because you have to get to a point where you can tell their story and I think understanding the culture is very important so I mean I understand Lebanon because I am originally from there and I speak the language but sometimes you have to have an intermediate person with you, you have to do some research before hand but you have to go with a very open mind in that sense, because a small mistake could throw the whole project off.

Geri: 00:22:57;16 So how do you go about taking your pictures? Do you take your pictures and then speak to your subjects afterwards? How does that go exactly?

Rania: 00:23:10;06 I don't really have a rule of how to go about it exactly. I mean if I'm on the street and I see something that I think is important to photograph I would before I would speak to anybody just because once you speak to people you lose the spontaneity of the moment. If I'm at people's homes, like at the camp or after the war or whatever, I mean sometimes I'm photographing and talking or after and I don't feel there's really a rule. I feel you have to sense the moment and go with it. And sometimes people do want to talk before and understand what you're doing and sometimes they want you to take specific pictures. You might want to do that first and stay there long enough that you can take the picture that you want to take.

Geri: 00:23:54;27 From a westerner's perspective, now you can just imagine going into the future without your background. How can you gain access to people in Lebanon? How can you get them to trust you?

Rania: 00:24:14;11 You now you do, but you put in more time. It took me a while to gain trust in the camps. This took much longer than in Lebanon, per say. And you just learn what the right channels are, like if there are NGO's (?) who will help, you may want to go through the NGOs. You might want to get somebody local who knows somebody. I mean, people are extremely welcoming, but as long as they trust you. If you just show up like that, it will happen but it might take longer. So you just have to give yourself the time and really try to understand. Like if somebody offers you a glass of water or coffee or whatever, even if you don't want it, you don't want to insult people by refusing so you have to learn a little customs and go with it. It takes time, I mean, you have to build relationships and be patient and actually very important for westerners not to just go and assume that it's ok to take the picture or to assume that its okay to go anywhere or whatever. But you get to the right channels to get permission but once you have it people are pretty open.

Geri: 00:25:25;22 These are emotional photographs. How are you able to keep everything together when you are capturing them?

Rania: 00:25:37;20 You know, actually, it takes a while. And I think that I had to get passed the fact that I was getting pretty emotional about the subjects or feeling bad about the conditions they were living in. Once you get passed that and you look at them as people you're having conversation with or just making the best out of their lives, and once you get passed this feeling, "Okay, how can I help?" or feeling sorry, but I don't want to say sorry, feeling very emotional about it, I think I was able to photograph them much better once I was able to get passed that. But it took a very long time and it took getting to know the person as a person and not just looking at the surrounding, again, behind them. Does it make sense? And I think for a while I was being very at tentative because I felt emotional and I didn't want to look like a voyeur in people's lives. I met with an editor at Life Magazine and he told me that if you want to help these people you have to get in their face and take the picture and it was the best advice I took because I realize that if they were willing to let me take their picture, I could get closer, you know. I think it was a lot of steps that I had to take to get passed the fact that, "Okay, maybe once I was able to take their picture and capture them," I was able not to feel as emotional. Maybe that's a way of channeling it somehow, I'm not sure.

Geri: 00:27:23;29 I've taken a look at some of your projects. The one that was really striking to me was your project that looks at the Women of Islam. What struck me was you talked about, your statement was how important a role that women have in that culture. Now, that's very different from my understanding of it here in the United States of Women in Islam, why is that?

Rania: 00:27:58;07 Who know, I should also narrow it and say that this is, I'm talking about Lebanon. I don't want to go into something that I'm not as familiar with. But I think Lebanon itself already, I mean, for me it shows, well the media would tend to say if a woman was veiled or covered she was oppressed or lived in an oppressed society. In Lebanon, the women really play a leading role, even when I went over and photographed during the Hezbollah, the women organized rallies or whatever and they are in no way oppressed, even if they are covered from top to bottom. In Lebanon, women do not have to wear the veil. There is a large percentage of the population that is Christian and a large percentage of the population that is Muslim that was not covered. When I grew up in Lebanon, most women did not wear the veil. That's a pretty new phenomenon. The women who are doing it are doing it by choice, in Lebanon anyway.

And a lot of them are educated. A lot of them go to the American University and they have a whole philosophy by doing it and I think the veil is a very layered subject as to why women wear it and it has many different personal reasons. But I just want to say that in that culture, in Lebanon, the women play a very important role. They work, one of the women who worked, she was a woman of Hezbollah in a sense that _____. I kind of followed her and photographed her quite a bit and then I went back with her to her house and her husband was wearing shorts and cooking and she was the one working. So I think there's a lot of stereotyping that's happens and even me, living in Lebanon, I was taken back by that. So I think it's important to keep remembering that it's very wrong to stereotype the whole society because people, some women are made to do that in Afghanistan, you know.

Geri: 00:30:04;01 So in Lebanon, the Hijab would you say is more of a flag of liberation?

Rania: 00:30:11;20 I don't know if I would go that far but there are some women who wear it who told me that they were liberated to wear it. I mean that's their perception but I wouldn't call it that. That's personal perception of women who want to put it on.

Geri: 00:30:31;06 Again, in your project you talked about how Lebanon is a micro continent that is going on in the Middle East. **(screen saver)** I wanted to ask why is it that we don't see photographs like yours in our own media here in the United States?

Rania: 00:31:37;01 I don't know but I wish you did. I don't know and it's the reason it made me want to do this kind of work. Maybe if everybody did it I wouldn't be doing it. I don't know. I think we should see more of that because I think people in the United States would understand the Middle East much better. I think reporting tends to be general I want to say, and it doesn't get too much into depth and details of specific issues in the Middle East and maybe the photography is the same.

Geri: 00:32:17;16 So the coverage is at the surface rather than...?

Rania: 00:32:22;21 I think so. I think the coverage at the surface, I think the coverage does not show enough all sides. I think the coverage tends to be almost like black and white, right or wrong and doesn't invite people to ask questions and to scratch the surface a little more. That's my personal impression, I mean I don't want to generalize but maybe being from the Middle East a lot of times when I listen to the news I feel like a lot of things are missing.

Geri: 00:32:54;18 Do you think that, you have this project about Muslim women, why is it that we need to do that? It's a related question to what I just asked you obviously but why is it that something like that is needed?

Rania: 00:33:10;15 I think it is needed just like seeing everybody in the refugee camps was needed. I think these are issues that are just not talked about. I think it is very easy to stereotype Palestinians as terrorists and Muslim women as oppressed and there's always a different side to the story and I think it's important to tell the story. I think if women want to wear the veil let them do it and now all of a sudden they're being judged in this special category or another.

Geri: 00:33:47;09 In one of your statements, you talked about how you don't want your pictures to be political and they can be interpreted as very political.

Rania: 00:34:00;26 You know, the subject is probably inherently political, which is why a lot of people don't approach the subject. But I'm not trying to make any political statement or suggest any political solution. It's just a problem that especially the camps, I'm assuming that's what you're referring to, people just don't approach that subject period because there's no easy solution to it and in the meantime there are all these people who live in poor deprivation and the problems going to keep growing, it's not going to get smaller. I think it's just completely ignored so I just want to give them a face and a voice and it may be interpreted as political but I try not to view it as political, I try to view them as people.

Geri: 00:34:52;13 You use a term schizophrenic about Lebanon and in one of your statements you said that Lebanon was a _____ for what was going on in the Middle East. So then could you say that the Middle East was schizophrenic?

Rania: 00:35:07;13 No, maybe I would say it's the _____ going on in the world and everything, two sides of everything are always in Lebanon, I mean in that sense but maybe not in the Middle East because Lebanon represents more in the sense that it has a lot of more western culture and Christian religion than a lot more countries in the Middle East. So it's probably _____ that goes on in the world in that sense. Maybe I should change my statement. (laughs) Maybe in that sense it could probably be seen as schizophrenic because things are side-by-side and mixed in and _____ then conflicted and it varies according to the times.

Geri: 00:35:51;25 I'm going to go back to the July War. I didn't know that you were there. What did it feel like to be caught?

Rania: 00:36:02;15 It was actually pretty horrible because I thought that I had moved past the war, the Civil War in Lebanon. I mean I came to the U.S., I made my life, I had my kids, I made my career, everything and I really put it all behind me and I think being stuck in the war there made me realize that it was all buried there, everything came out to the surface. All of these things I didn't realize I remembered just came back. When I looked at my kids, for example, and you hear, when you first see the bomb and it lights up the sky, then you count to about six and then you hear it, then it's like all of a sudden I found myself telling my kids that and then I realized that there were all of these things buried there. So basically as a result I think I really fell apart during the war. I don't know if it was post-dramatic stress or whatever you want to call it but it just all came crashing in my head, but the difference is I have four kids now and I was a kid before. So it was tough for me actually to realize at that point I'm not a war photographer and I need to get the kids out of the country and that's all that matters.

Geri: 00:37:05;04 Can you tell the story of how you got out, I read about it in that article?

Rania: 00:37:11;13 It was actually very tough. I was actually going there to do quite a bit of work that summer and I even brought an au pair with me who's French, so I had my four American kids and French au pair to deal with in a war situation. So, we were waiting for the American evacuation and then I was really worried they would not take the au pair with me because she's French. So I tried to list her with the French Embassy and they said she's not a priority because she's young and healthy and she might not be leaving right away. I was really scared because I couldn't just risk taking my kids and leaving her in the country. So we ended up taking cabs. My father-in-law was there and he took charge, I mean I could not make a

decision I was completely irrational. And the fact is there was no easy decision to be made because the road to Syria was being bombed on and off but staying in Lebanon we didn't know how far the conflict would escalate so this was the unknown that was very hard to make a decision one way or another. So my father, my father-in-law and my husband from Boston just made the decision for me and that's all I wanted. We rented two cabs to leave and we left in two cabs via the Syrian border but I made a big scene that I wanted to be in the same cab as my four kids. All I could think of is even if one of the cabs is bombed, we're all together. Either we go together or we all stay basically. It's really a horrible frame of mind to be in so, and it was really one of the worst moments in my life. We were saying good-bye to our family who was staying in the war, and we're just leaving like that as if we're worth more in a way. So we left via the _____ and the cab was speeding like you wouldn't believe because they were bombing the road on and off. It was bombed the day before and it was bombed a day later so we made it okay. And the first time that I felt like I was back to normal, back to my own self was at the border and the first thing I did, I grabbed my camera. And I have a picture that I always show that was part of that moment at the border.

Geri: 00:39:24;04 Do you have it with you?

Rania: 00:39:26;22 It's outside actually I think as well. It's a bunch of women on a truck because the women, everybody were leaving by the truckloads. I mean I was in a nice cab but a lot of people were in trucks in the sun. It was pretty bad it was horrible. The road to Syria, from Beirut to _____ to the Syrian border is usually filled with cars and horns and traffic jams and it was just so fast. There was not a soul on the street it was eerie. But, we made it okay so I can't complain.

Geri: 00:40:00;25 It's really remarkable and astonishing that the people in Lebanon are so resilient.

Rania: 00:40:07;25 It completely is. Especially having lived the war and coming back and seeing how they rebuild, completely astonishing.

Geri: 00:40:17;26 One picture in particular, it's of the little girl that's clinging to the wall, it's the one that's up the most here in the building, can you talk about it?

Rania: 00:40:30;17 Yes. This picture was actually not taken after the war. This picture was taken in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon in 2005. I think this picture is just expressive, I mean I was photographing this family and there was no dramatic moment or anything that had happened in the photo actually up until a point that actually the first year I skipped through it and I never noticed it on my contact sheets. I went though it a year later and I noticed it and now it's one of my favorite and I think it's important because it shows background life going on and then the girl looking in the other side of, if you want to overanalyze it after the fact, as if she's looking to the other direction of what her life really is, which is where her mother and the little baby are in the background. So it was just a normal family home in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon.

Geri: 00:41:28;15 What was it that made you recognize it later on?

Rania: 00:41:33;08 I don't know I should have...(someone walks in front of camera to go talk to class)

Geri: 00:41:53;28 So what is it about that photograph that made you recognize it later?

Rania: 00:41:57;04 I don't know. I'm upset that I missed it the first time around I guess. Sometimes I think, sometimes I think there are photos I remember taking because I remember the moment being very powerful. Then when I develop my film I come back and look for these specific images. Sometimes in photos where nothing was really happening kind of fly by because I was living through the memory of the moment but when you go back through them a little time later you realize when you thought you had a moment the pictures aren't really that important but pictures where you capture a beautiful moment but nothing much was happening, it was maybe just an intimate moment or whatever, then these are the ones that stand out in the end and this was one of them. But the memory of the moment was not there for me to specifically look for the image on the spot. Do you know what I mean? Because sometimes I think I got a great picture because there was such an event that I really enjoyed photographing and then I go back and it's really, it's not there. And sometimes there's photos that you don't remember taking that end up staying.

Geri: 00:43:08;23 Whether for some reason it's the lighting or...?

Rania: 00:43:11;06 Yeah. I think it's just because there's not much happening in that picture and that's maybe why it's become such an important photo, it's just a normal day in the life basically, with the girl looking out and her expression looking pretty, I think her expression is powerful in a way and you can see the mother taking care of the baby in the background. It's just; it's a simple moment. I mean, I remember now when I took the picture but it's not something that I opened my negatives to look for.

Geri: 00:43:38;08 Is it because you are a mother or is it because of the children? Are they easy to photograph? What is it?

Rania: 00:43:49;26 You know, it's very interesting that you asked me that and I've been asked that quite a lot, quite a bit. I think subconsciously it's because I'm a mother. I wasn't aware in the beginning that I was photographing mostly women and children as much and there they rationalize that they're the one's who bear the brunt of all these problems. They don't ask for all of these things, they happen to be born there, you know the kids, and they have to deal with it. The beauty and the innocence of how they deal with a situation that are bad or unacceptable, or whatever it is. So yes, I think in having kids I am very drawn to how these kids make the best out of their life and what it has to offer them. So I think as a mother, subconsciously I'm drawn to the kids and the mothers.

Geri: 00:44:40;04 Is it also because the men are so hard to photograph, or willing to be photographed?

Rania: 00:44:47;27 I think that some photos of men...I think that maybe photographically the more emotional were the women's ones. A lot of the men do not want to be photographed. But I find that the moment that would attract me personally would be the emotional moments between a woman and her daughter. And a lot of times a lot of the photographs I take of men I end up not using so now I'm aware that I'm focusing on women and children and it just happened, even

though it was the beginning.

Geri: 00:45:24;25 Now, you mentioned in your e-mail that you're working on a project on women and children in Boston, is that correct?

Rania: 00:45:33;04 I just decided, especially when we didn't go to Lebanon this summer, in photographing the veil and Muslim women, and I think people that are misrepresented by the media. And I think the natural evolution of this project would be to focus on Muslim women in the U.S. and I just started that so this is nowhere near any position to be shown yet or anything, but it's still brewing. I'm still working on that works and I want to get this kind of what I did on the other project more. I think that's another untold story that's important to show. Since I've started, I'm having a harder time with access, people are very suspicious, sadly I think because of the media, they don't know how the pictures going to get used and I have to be patient, just like I was patient in Lebanon, getting my, getting the contacts and the right access. I think that's what I have to do here, take my time to do it the right way. So yeah, I'm interested to pursue that a little more.

Geri: 00:46:43;28 And this is in the community outside of Boston?

Rania: 00:46:47;01 Oh there are a lot of Muslims in Boston. I mean, not nearly as much as there are in Dearborn but Dearborn is Arab Americans mostly and Boston it's Muslim. It's very different. I'm talking about here people from Pakistan, Philippine, African Americans, everything, and I was actually fascinated with the variety because I was used to photographing mostly Arab Muslim women in Lebanon and now it's very interesting for me to see what a variety of nationality and to see them all brought together by a community, into a community in a sense by religion.

Geri: 00:47:23;03 We're encountering some access issues as well in getting in touch with some people who have been covered by the media and rightfully so they don't want to talk to us because they don't want to be harmed. I'm curious as to how are you working on your access?

Rania: 00:47:42;13 You know, I'm not really working that hard on it anymore. I mean I was and I will again but I'm going to work on editing my photos towards a book now. I feel like I need to keep my focus in one spot. But I went, when I was trying to do that, I tried to go though MASS, the Mass Association of Muslim...Muslim Association...Oh no, I don't remember on this one, please don't quote me on this one. And I got in touch with a woman there who was completely open. She was from Trinidad and had converted later in life. She helped me with some access. I thought I had it all set and then I went to an event and she wasn't there. I was actually asked to leave because people got very nervous and I just got out without making a scene. I realized that I really need to be patient and do all of the right things, so it's going to be a longer process. But, I'm also now going through colleges because I found that younger women in colleges are much more open to talking and being photographed and all that.

Geri: 00:48:59;13 So is that project you're trying to capture their daily life?

Rania: 00:49:04;14 Exactly. I just want to capture their daily life. One time I was meeting with

a woman and she was wearing the hijab and we were meeting at Barnes and Noble. She was the woman that I was going to photograph. People stared at us quite a bit and then I realized that it must not be easy being veiled in this country. So I think I really would love to really hear what they have to say about it. I really considered, I mean I'm not Muslim myself, but I considered getting veiled for like a week to see what it's like but I don't know if I even have the courage to do it. So it is not an easy decision to make.

Geri: 00:49:48;07 I remember interviewing a young woman who was probably 12 years old or so and she didn't have a hijab on but her friends did and she talked about not being ready.

Rania: 00:50:01;07 Yeah, I actually find that quite a bit in Lebanon. That's quite interesting because when I was photographing at the American University on my last trip I photographed a bunch of girls who were together and some were not covered at all, some were wearing the hijab, and one was wearing the niqab, which covers up to the eyes and some were interesting enough kind of wearing it half way, which means they wear long sleeves and pants so they are not uncovered but they do not yet cover their heads. It was a matter of deciding when they were ready, because I found that if they decided to put on the veil, then it's not right to take it off. So you really have to be ready and make the decision so you're committed. So I don't know if that's what she meant at that age but I learned that pretty recently this is quite a bit the case. So, (screen saver appears) if a woman decided to go from the veil to the niqab, they would have to be ready to do that.

Geri: 00:51:12;04 And we also, last summer we went to an Arab American festival and we saw a fashion show. And I just...

Rania: 00:51:25;06 Oh god, you've got to let me know when this happen now. Really.

Geri: 00:51:29;21 A fashion show, yeah. Where this Lebanese fashion designer, she had runway models and beautiful clothes, but my understanding of the hijab is that it is for modesty purposes, your saving yourself, you want to be pure for your husband and things related to being modest. But in the fashion show there was dramatic make up that was being used, so I'm like this is kind of the opposite.

Rania: 00:52:04;12 This is where I think the hijab has many, many layers and in Lebanon you see quite a bit of that and I show quite a bit of that in my photos. That if you come to the show it will be on tonight. I think, this is what I call a de-veil modestly fashion devotion or statement and I really think it's very hard to narrow it down. I mean some women, yes, want to do it completely for modesty and would not even wear make up, some women, like the one I saw wearing the niqab, completely not want to worry about what she looks like at all so she covers herself. There are still women who decided they don't want to show anybody parts but still want to look beautiful so I think there's so many different levels and layers to it. That's why it's hard to just narrow it down to one aspect or, you know. A lot of these women who are putting their, I have a picture of this woman at Starbucks with a hijab and kind of tying it up in a very modern way but had beautiful sunglasses. I mean, probably \$500 sunglasses, you know. And I have another one of a woman getting a botox consultation, so I think there still is the aspect of wanting to look pretty. But again, this varies among women, I don't think its okay to generalize

it to one aspect.

Geri: 00:53:31;24 Some people talk about the stereotyping of Arab Americans in general as part of a cycle, now it's their turn to be stereotyped. Do you feel that way, that before it was the Asians, then?

Rania: 00:53:50;10 I feel that, well, I'm an Arab American and I've never felt in a way stereotyped. Yes, I get searched more than others at the airport by far, especially if I'm going to Lebanon or coming from Lebanon. Now I expect it and I give myself the time for it and I move on. In my daily life, I don't feel in any way affected by it at all but I could see Muslim Americans being quite a bit affected by that. Here there's some distinction to be made between Arab Americans and Muslim Americans and it's not easy a very clear line to make and I don't really know where the line is and I don't want to draw it but maybe if you're integrated pretty well into a normal American life, I don't know. And depending where you live as well, in which part of the country I think. But I agree, I definitely think there is some type of segregation against Muslim Americans anyway and this is why we're having such a hard time with access photographing them or interviewing them, or whatever it is because bringing such a high level of suspicion on their side. I'm mean rightfully so, right.

Geri: 00:55:03;02 So tell us about this book.

Rania: 00:55:07;18 Oh it's a long shot. Well, I guess not a long shot but I have a potential publisher and I'm hoping that it's going to go through. Basically we're going to make a book dummy and we're going to try and see co-publishers who will try and do it with him so he's pretty confident that it will work but I'm hoping that it will go through. And I'm still deciding if I'm going to divide it into three parts, aftermath, camps, and women of Islam and Lebanon, or if I want to make it more open and make it about the schizophrenia of Lebanon or however we call it, or Lebanon at the Crossroads and keep it more general.

Geri: 00:55:45;13 Now most of your images are black and white, what is it about the images in black and white that?

Rania: 00:55:53;17 You know I really, my photos I like to focus on the core human being and the expressions and I think this is how you stay away from all the distractions. But this is very personal, that's how I see it. I don't know, I just got used to seeing it one way and when I look through my lens I see black and white.

Geri: 00:56:15;26 So let's think into the future for a little bit, five or ten years. Where do you hope, or what do you hope your work I guess is as that point?

Rania: 00:56:28;19 Well, I'm definitely hoping I'll have a book by then. I'm hoping by then my kids will be a little older and I'll actually love to photograph the aftermath in Iraq, like the real aftermath when life is getting back to normal. But again, it's kind of long time, and I would like to cover more of the Middle East. I don't have a definite plan of where this should be because I don't know where the Middle East is going to be then. Things are changing so much so fast. But in ten years my kids will not be little anymore and I will be able to have much more time to

kind of focus on spending more time there in the different countries in the area.

Geri: 00:57:11;24 Have you tried to enter Iraq?

Rania: 00:57:13;18 No I didn't. I photographed in Syria and a little bit in Turkey but in Syria I photographed but in Iraq, I mean I'm a mother again, I mean when I want to go I want to feel comfortable spending time getting to know people and really photograph them at their core, you know. And not just in a war situation, which is the case now.

Geri: 00:57:41;25 What kind of pictures did you take in Syria and in Turkey?

Rania: 00:57:44;11 In Turkey, very little. I kind of took street photos more. Yeah, in Syria and Turkey Street photos and in Syria I did go to some refugee camps though. I wasn't as free to move in the refugee camps in Syria as I was in Lebanon so I didn't take nearly as many and they weren't as intimate so I ended up not including most of them. But I photographed pretty freely when I was on the street in the _____ actually surprisingly. I was ever told anything.

Geri: 00:58:13;15 Have you felt like you were in any danger taking photographs?

Rania: 00:58:17;17 In Lebanon or in Syria?

Geri: 00:58:18;10 Anywhere, in any of those places.

Rania: 00:58:20;15 No. I mean if people say no I'll just put away the camera as long as, well nobody every bothered me personally and I think it's important to do it through the right channels, like not just show up on my own, unknown, without a single contact or person in the refugee camp where you wouldn't be welcome either. So there's like a process to go through, and then I felt pretty safe.

Geri: 00:58:50;22 Do you keep in touch with any of your _____?

Rania: 00:58:52;05 Yeah. Not all of them and in the past two years there has been some turmoil in some way but I always go back and give them pictures. I think that's very important, and that's something that you'll want to tell your students, but it shows that you care and has that level of respect. And if you just, and that you're just not stealing the pictures and going away and becoming famous because of their photo and they never see it again. It's courtesy I think to kind of if you can give them photographs back or, you know, or at least visit or at least something.

Geri: 00:59:32;16 When you do that, are you seeing that they've experienced progress in their lives or is it the same?

Rania: 00:59:40;23 Mostly the same, sadly.