

De-Othering the Middle East Dialogue Project

De-Otherizing: the act of deconstructing everything we think we know about other people, nations or cultures and re-learning through direct listening and honest dialogue with those people and their perspectives to build a truth-based understanding of each other

The DO Dialogue Project is a traveling project that connects American communities with young adults across the Middle East through virtual technology as a demonstration of the power of face-to-face relationship building for a more conscious global community. The seed for this project was planted when I traveled with the Ibrahim Leadership and Dialogue Program through the Middle East and spoke in person with local changemakers, leaders and young adults throughout the region, showing me the importance of real conversation and dialogue for cross-cultural understanding. That seed continued to grow through a conversation between me and my friend and former mentee, Yazan, a Syrian refugee living in Iraqi Kurdistan, over videochat one day. He was trying to find ways, despite his own mental health and financial issues, to lift up the stories, poetry and perspectives of young adults in the Middle East struggling to reach their potential, express themselves and deal with the isolation they feel from exclusionary practices such as the U.S. Muslim Ban and other countries closing their borders to their nationalities. On my end, I was trying to find ways to bring more awareness to my fellow Americans about the true situations of so many refugees, the realities of Islamophobia and ways we could deconstruct the generalizations of the diverse populations of the Middle East that stem from systemic rhetoric around terrorism, war and conflict that fuel discriminatory laws, aggressive policies and hate crimes. So we combined our ideas and created a platform to achieve both goals, creating an outlet for economically disadvantaged Middle Eastern youth to share their stories as well as an opportunity for Americans to learn the real stories behind the headlines about that region. As we employ more speakers across the Middle East and hold more sessions across the U.S., the project aims to deconstruct our conceptions of the “other” as well as elevate unheard voices.

Our first trial dialogue sessions happened in Louisville, Kentucky, Chattanooga, Tennessee and Joshua Tree, California where we received positive feedback and interest in bringing the project to different organizations and events across the country. In Joshua Tree, we skyped in Yazan, the co-director, to do a live poetry reading in Arabic and English and Bashar, a Syrian refugee and musician living in Turkey, to answer questions that spanned across their personal struggles, what it means to be Syrian, mental health issues and their perspectives on relationship building across cultures. The audience consisted of around thirty locals of Joshua Tree and they really enjoyed the opportunity to learn personally from someone going through the struggles of being a refugee with travel restrictions; an identity that is often generalized and decontextualized by the media.

Moving forward, we aim to have at least ten more dialogue sessions in different states focusing on the Mid-West and South within the next five months. The challenges we are overcoming include outreach, getting people to come to events and making connections with places able and willing to host events which takes time to coordinate. Therefore, we have expanded the project time-line to include the next five months to secure times, locations and events. In the future, we hope to create a portable installation that allows for meaningful and casual dialogue in public settings, such as street fairs or outdoor festivals, as well as create partnerships to spread virtual dialogue sessions across America for sustainable and on-going conversation with the “other.”

For more information about the project and the speakers currently involved, I encourage you to go to our ever-evolving website www.de-otherize.org

In respect and solidarity,

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