

Zaid Nahshal interviewed by Ariel Lewis, Linda Davis, Amjad Alsaidi
October 15, 2021
Brooklyn, NY

SUMMARY KEYWORDS:

business, store, impacted, pandemic, mount Vernon, shop, customers, prospect avenue, clientele, candies, located, workers, Yemen, support, groceries, mentioned, people, brothers, bridges, new york city

Ariel Lewis (00:03): Hi, my name is Ariel Lewis, and also in the group is Linda Davis and Amjad Alsaidi, Sorry if I pronounced that wrong. Were interviewing Zaid Nashall, a worker at Prospect Grocery located at ninth East prospect Avenue, Mount Vermont, New York. On October 15 and Zaid do you give us permission to record and make public this oral history?

Zaid Nashall (00:30): Yes.

AL (00:31): Just a reminder throughout the interview, you don't have to answer any questions if they make you feel uncomfortable.

ZN (00:38): Okay.

Amjad Alsaidi (00:40): Alright, so we're gonna start with basic information like first, how old are you?

ZN (00:46): I am 24 years old.

AA (00:49): Alright, where are you from?

ZN (00:51): I'm from Yemen.

AA (00:53): Tell me the long story about how you and your family ended up in New York City.

ZN (00:59): Initially, my father received his USA citizenship A long time ago. Then he applied for citizenship for my brothers and sisters and I, and fortunately, he was successful in this. In this process. I got my US citizenship certificate and password from the US, USA embassy in the capital city of Yemen, which is Sanaa. I came to New York City when I was in ninth grade, and I went to high school and I graduated with a high GPA. And I was a part of the principal's list. Then I went to all IU for a pharmacy program. And you know, I'm still attending this program, which is my last year. So while I was attending school, my brothers and I worked together, in a grocery store called a HNA candy and grocery store. Located in Mount Vernon, New York. The address for this business is 9 East prospect Avenue, Mount Vernon, New York 10050.

AA (02:09): When did you start working at the shop or owning the shop?

ZN (02:12): So I started working at this place when I was in 10th grade, or maybe ninth grade? You know, I was 17 years old.

AA (02:25): How do you start working? What were, like some steps that they started teaching you when you first started working?

ZN (02:36): So you know, I began working at my father's store, working with my brothers to support our family in Yemen. So we cooperated and helped each other, you know, to live a better life. So before I came to New York City, my father went to that place. And he opened the store for us to work. So I learned everything for my brothers, and you know, when we will work I learned everything from them.

AA (03:05): Alright, Interesting.

Linda Davis (03:12): So to explore the business, your business can you please describe it in your own words, like- what is it like to work at your job?

ZN (03:26):

So, you know, the business consists of two sections. One section is a smoke shop and the other section is candies and groceries. Yeah.

LD (03:40):

Okay. And so do you know anything about the history of your business or the name of your business? So the beginning?

ZN (03:51):

Yeah, it's in a candy and grocery store. once held by my older brother before I traveled to New York City, so they want the business for three years, and then he went to he went back home. So the business was not that good. And, you know, we didn't make that much, much money in the beginning because we were lucky on that area, Mount Vernon, and we suffered and the beginning paying for the rent and paying for the workers.

LD (04:28):

And has your business become a significant source of pride for you and your family?

ZN (04:35):

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. The business became famous in the mobile notary. And a few years later, so the customers like the store and you know what we offer for sale.

LD (04:50):

How long has the shop been open?

ZN (04:53):

So my father wanted this place in 2012. So it means open for about for nine years so far.

LD (05:04):

and, how do you attract your clients?

ZN (05:09):

We attracted our clients you know by having good professional relationship better services and we were like out on a lot of amount of stuff to sell in our store also we attracted our client by you know having a good and organized business

LD (05:30):

and, how do you stay connected to the needs and wants of your clientele?

ZN (05:37):

You know we had good customer service and we had good products for what our customers like. The store is very clean and we usually check expiration dates of our product more often. Yeah, so like we we asked our customers like what would be better for- for the store and what should we have offered them for better services? So therefore we were able to attract our clients

LD (06:13):

and do you have a particular item that you think that is popular?

ZN (06:20):

I will still Yes. I mean, the story you know, we also like you know groceries such as Oreos 1000s salad dressing, and you know cereals and breakfast food you know some some other stuff like like candies, like you know chocolate, gummies. hard candies, lollipops and chewing gums and you know we were selling like some tobacco products and for example, sugar cigars, there's something called roll your own sugar in cigar.

AL (07:09):

Well that sounds very interesting. If you could tell us about the neighborhood where your business is located, and remind us what street it's on.

ZN (07:19):

So the business HNA candy is located in Prospect Avenue and Mount Vernon. As I mentioned before, it's in the main area of Mount Vernon where they're like shopping places. Where you can find Dunkin Donuts, McDonald's, chicken hut clothes stores, T Mobile MetroPCS, and there's a lot more. Also there is, you know, a police station located nearby like near the store and it is very safe to have a business open 24/7.

AL (07:54):

Oh so it's very centered in the main business and very safe? So, streetwise what else goes around? Like are there many events or celebrations or anything like that?

ZN (08:12):

Um like in front of the business?

AL (08:16):

Um in the street, the neighborhood whichever.

ZN (08:21) :

So you know, the area is safe due to the police station located nearby. They will, you know, change over time. They were like no bridges working and you know, there were like no bridges for cars to move around. But when they fixed, and re-built the bridges the business went up, and you know more cars came to our place and like more customers purchased from our store.

AL (08:52):

So you would say like over the time it's become a little bit more gentrified?

ZN (08:56):

Yeah because you know they are like several bridges, I think four. They were blocked and there were no cars from there and you know, all the taxi drivers used to go somewhere else; and when the government fixed the plate and the bridges you know, a lot of taxi drivers came to our store.

AL (09:17):

So there's a lot of access to public transportation. Besides bridges, you have, like trains stations around there and bus stops?

ZN (09:27):

Yeah, there are bus stops and there is the Metro North. You know, the bus helps us to get to the two trains only. But Metro North is express and you know, it helps us to go to downtown Manhattan faster.

AL (09:46):

Would you say the condition of the sidewalks in the streets, they're pretty, like, smoothed out or like cracked.

ZN (09:55):

The conditions of the sidewalk and the street are in good condition. So you know our mayor is working very hard to provide us with good environmental conditions. He supported us, you know he supported our environment and we built bridges as, you know I mentioned before.

AL (10:14):

Yeah, I think that's really great. Would you like to see any changes made to the neighborhood to make it more welcoming?

ZN (10:22):

Um, I think the park, you know, there is one park nearby that has to be, you know, they have to take care of it, they have to clean up more often.

AL (10:35):

Kind of upkeep it more.

AA (10:38): All right. Sounds very interesting. Just as a reminder, you don't have to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable.

ZN (10:45): Okay.

AA (10:48): Okay, I want to ask you about the communication between you, between the shops, your shop and other shops, or between you and the other owner's shops? Do you communicate with the neighborhood shop? Like other shops? Maybe another grocery store? Or any other shop?

ZN (11:02): Yeah, we do like to have a good relationship with our neighboring stores. We do communicate.

AA (11:12): Do you guys communicate with collective activities? Like if you need anything you can borrow from another shop?

ZN (11:23): Actually, we don't. No we do not.

AA (11:30): Is there any community bonding between local businesses?

ZN (11:35): bonding between local businesses? Yeah. We're like, What do you mean?

AA (11:46): Yeah, what I mean, like, you know, is there any community's bonding in between the business?

ZN (11:51): The business, our business, our business and other businesses?

AA (11:55): Yeah.

ZN (11:57): No, there is not.

AA (11:59): I'm sorry, guys. For some reason, the screen went off. Okay, what are the hours you work? And how does the climate change based on time of the day?

ZN (12:20): So you know, the store opens from 5am to 12pm, Monday to Friday, and also they open from 7am to 11pm during the weekend, and our customers like our business, our business hours, because the location does, you know, it doesn't allow 24 seven for small businesses like our business, they only allow like, 24 hours for like, Dunkin Donuts, McDonald's. So the customers, you know, come more often in the morning.

AA (12:55): So the morning time is busier?

ZN (13:00): Yeah.

AA (13:01): How have you been received by the community? Like, do you think you are welcome?

ZN (13:11): Yeah, we will. Yeah, we were welcome by the community. And we became friends over time, you know, when they got to know us, then we became more friends ?

AA (13:24): What about interacting with the community?

ZN (13:27): We normally interacted with the community, there were no issues regarding that.

AA (13:35): Have you ever deal with racism, discrimination, Islamophobia, in your work?

ZN (13:43): No, nothing happened based on what you have asked.

AA (13:48): Are there any memorable events that took place at the store since you began working there?

ZN (13:57): Actually, yes. You know, they became more friendly over time, because they got to know us more and like we became friends, and as I mentioned before you know, clientele ask for products that we didn't have, and then we, you know, we offer them, and we order them, to sell.

AA: Okay interesting!

LD (14:32):

Okay. And has the ... continued, has the clients have changed since you've worked there in what ways?

ZN (14:43):

Have you said that the client changes.

AA (14:52): like race, if there are more white people come in?

LD (14:57):

Yeah (agreeing)

ZN (14:56):

Yeah, yeah, yeah. I mentioned that, you know, like, in the beginning, when we opened the store, there were less customers. And, you know, we asked them, like, what product we have, we, you know, we should have in the store for them. So, you know, and then we offer them the product they asked for. So from there, like, you know, the more customers came in.

AA (15:22): I'm sorry, just to add to Linda, but what do you think of their ethnicity, like, you know, are there more white or black?

ZN (15:31):

their ethnicity?

LD (15:33):

What's their...

ZN (15:35):

Their? there, you know, African Americans? Jamaican Spanish? American? Yeah, some Yemeni? So it's very few white people.

LD (15:46):
Okay, so it's diverse?

ZN (15:49):
Yeah. But More African American and Jamaican

LD (15:54):
Okay, what? age groups? How old is it? Do you think your clientele are mostly?

ZN (16:03):
They're all different ages, except, you know, except children eight years of age and younger.

LD (16:12)
Okay, and what time does this-

ZN (16:13):
There are a lot of old people.

LD (16:17):
Okay, different ages, different backgrounds. And, okay. What time is this store? Mostly busy.

ZN (16:29):
It's mostly busy in the morning. Like, you know, a lot of doctors, they work in Mount Vernon hospital, they come in the morning before they go to before they go to work. You know, they come to our store for purchase.

LD (16:44):
Okay. And do you develop bonds with the people who enter your shop?

ZN (16:50):
No, there's none.

LD (16:53):
So they just come in and buy then leave? Yeah. Okay. Okay.

AL (17:03):
Um, so moving on to some of the strengths and weaknesses and opportunities they have? What are some economic challenges that you might face? If you have any, inside of your business?

ZN (17:16)
Um, yeah, there's some economics, you know, during the COVID-19, the store's income went down and we were not like, we were not making enough money because of the pandemic. We

did not have delivered services, like from before the COVID-19 pandemic and this is, you know, because we didn't have the delivery services. Business went down.

AL (17:44):

Yeah, of course, and what about technological challenges? Like, as you can see where I'm viewing through zoom now. Has that had an impact on your store in any way?

ZN (17:55):

No, no, there is no technology, or environment, no there is nothing.

AL (18:00):

Okay. Are there any cultural or legal challenges you face?

ZN (18:04):

No cultural and legal challenges?

AL (18:08):

Okay, and how would you say the gentrification that you said you witnessed earlier on, How would you say that's impacted your business?

ZN (18:18):

So, you know, there's like, a new business that opened, like in the same building? Yeah, this has impacted our business because of competition.

AL (18:32):

So it made it more difficult to kind of stabilize-

ZN (18:36):

Yeah, because it's the same, same business when and having to say, like, very the same or similar business in one building. This is gonna impact both businesses because of competition.

AL (18:50):

yes. Understandable.

AA (18:54): So, you know, working during the pandemic, what anxieties did you have about working at the start of the COVID-19?

ZN (19:05): We were having anxieties because we were exposed to people, you know, the whole time, we were at a high risk of being exposed to the COVID-19 virus, and the business went down in the beginning because people stayed home.

AA (19:21): Oh, so that's an impact. How has COVID impacted the workforce at your shop?

AA (19:35): Um, like the workers?

ZN (19:34): You know, because it's a family store, And, you know, I will work with my brothers. We had to work the whole time together and cooperate with each other.

AA: What I mean is there anyone who disagrees with work because of the pandemic or they don't feel like working?

ZN (20:02): No, Because every one of us feels like it's his store, that's the point.

AA (20:09): Okay, so what measures does your store take in the battle against COVID-19? Like practicing social distance or anything that could stop the virus from spreading?

ZN (20:24): So we made signs of distance in the store for customers to stay six feet away from each other. And we place like you know, bottles of hand sanitizers for customers, and you know, sanitize the areas more often to reduce the exposure back further to the COVID-19 virus and yeah that's it.

AA (20:48): Yeah, so I think you mentioned the COVID financial impact on your business. Do you think you want to explain a little bit more?

ZN (21:01): You know, the pandemic impacted our store and its income, you know. The store income went down because in the beginning a lot of people stayed home and as I mentioned, you know, we didn't have the delivery services. You know, we were not able to have that that services added to our business in the beginning of the COVID-19

AA (21:29): Has the government stepped in to offer support?

ZN (21:37): Yes, they did, but we didn't. We did not accept it because it is counted as a loan. As you know, we don't want to have a loan for our business.

AA (21:55): Has the relationship between workers and business been altered due to the government support for workers and employed? What I mean, like when the government supports workers like unemployment does it affect your store? Like, a lot of workers stopped and they don't want to work anymore because they receive unemployment?

ZN (22:21): I know in a lot of stores, a lot of people you know, they left the job. But in our store, no because it is a family business. And every one of us has to work because it's a family business. And we are brothers in the store.

AA (22:36): Have the protest for Black Lives Matter. That swept the city after the murder of George Floyd impacted your business.

ZN (22:46): No.

AA (22:47):
Like no Looting or anything?

ZN (22:51): No.

AA (22:53): How about other protests?

ZN (22:56): No.

AA (23:00): How do you overcome the challenge of the last two yearS Like for the for COVID pandemic? Anything? How did you overcome it?

ZN (23:10): So, I cooperate with my brothers as much as I can while I'm attending school remotely. And you know, and also in person for the lab, and we help each other. Which made it easier to overcome the situation of the covid 19 pandemic during the past two years.

AA (23:36): That's interesting!

LD (23:48):

To sum up everything. Is there anything we should ask that we didn't know?

ZN (23:55):

No, I think you covered everything that I know about my father's store.

LD (24:01):

Okay and are you still comfortable with this interview being public.

ZN (24:07):

I'm Yes, I'm comfortable

LD (24:13):

Okay Zaid thank you for your time.

AA (24:16):

Yeah, we appreciate your time. Thank you very much.

AL (24:22): Yes, Thank you. It was really helpful. Thank you. Um Yeah.