

“Dalya’s Other Country”

Directed by Julia Meltzer

Cinematography by Anne Etheridge

Edited by Catherine Hollander

Music Composed by Asma Maroof and Daniel Pineda

Produced by Julia Meltzer and Co-Produced by Mustafa Rony Zeno

Runtime; 75 minutes, broadcast hour and 18 minute short.

LOGLINE:

In 2012 Dalya and her mother Rudayna fled Aleppo for LA. Can they hold onto their Islamic traditions in a country that doesn’t embrace them?

SYNOPSIS:

In 2012 Dalya and her mother Rudayna fled Aleppo for Los Angeles as war took over. Months before, Rudayna learns a secret that destroys her marriage, leaving her single at midlife. Arriving in LA, Dalya enrolls as the only Muslim at Holy Family Catholic High School. Can mother and daughter remake themselves while holding on to their Islamic traditions?

Project Summary:

In 2012 Dalya Zeno fled Syria and the war with her mother, Rudayna, for a new life in Southern California. Months before leaving Aleppo, Rudayna learns a secret that her husband has been keeping from her: for the past 2 years he has been married to another wife. Rudayna, not willing to share her husband, decides to leave her marriage of 30 years. Arriving in Los Angeles, both mother and daughter are forced to rebuild their lives and cope with the loss of a husband, a father and their country.

At 14 Dalya finds herself at Holy Family Catholic High School for Girls—the only Muslim student with a headscarf in a sea of Mexican, Pilipino and Korean girls. Shot over 3 years “Dalya’s Other Country” takes place during Dalya’s high school years. In this time significant events take place in her life—basketball games, talent shows, proms, entrance into university and terrorist attacks at home in the US and around the world. All of these things shape her into a young adult with ideas of her own, different from her mother’s. Rudayna struggles to guide Dalya to stay within the rules of her religion and culture, when to say no and when to say yes. Dalya is figuring out which red lines to cross and which to stand behind.

Both mother and daughter face multiple challenges in their move to the United States, but the greatest is letting go of Mohammed Hassan, Dalya’s father and Rudayna’s ex-husband. Rudayna, at 50, has never been anything other than a housewife who takes care of her husband and her children. She is a practicing Muslim who adheres to her Sunni tradition: she wears hijab, prays 5 times a day, and observes Ramadan. However, she doesn’t agree with the part of her faith that allows men to marry 2, 3 or 4 wives.

When she learns that her husband has married another wife behind her back, she asks for a divorce. In Syrian Arab and Muslim culture, being a divorced woman at mid-life is difficult and still not accepted. However, Los Angeles allows some space for her, and she enrolls in college with the hopes of finding a job, something she has never had.

Over the course of the film Dalya changes from a hesitant, slightly timid young Syrian girl into a young self-described Syrian-American feminist. Rudayna holds her family together and works to redefine herself along with her daughter. “Dalya’s Other Country” is an intimate story of a family caught in the midst of historical events that force a mother and daughter to negotiate faith, adolescence, immigration, and identity in the United States.

Director’s Statement:

“Dalya’s Other Country” follows my last film “The Light In Her Eyes” about a Qur’an school for women and girls in Damascus, Syria. On and off from 2005 to 2010 I lived in Damascus and often traveled to Aleppo. Witnessing the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world where ancient trade routes, commerce, and culture were active—despite constraints imposed by the Syrian regime—made a deep impression on me. In 2012, while we were in distribution of TLIHE, the city of Aleppo was in the process of being destroyed by civil war. I wanted to document a family or an individual who was connected to this city. My daughter was born in 2012 and I no longer had the flexibility to travel and leave home as I did for my previous film, so I searched for a way to tell a story about Aleppo from close to home. I met Dalya and her mother Rudayna shortly after they arrived from Aleppo, and knew that I had found a compelling story.

Dalya and Rudayna’s move to Los Angeles is not the typical Syrian refugee story that has dominated the news. They are a middle class family with American citizenship; they were not suffering life in a refugee camp or trying to cross the Mediterranean in a raft; but they were nonetheless struggling to adjust to a new culture and the loss of their home. Their story offers a lens into how a traditional Sunni woman and young girl try to hold onto their customs and traditions within the US, which they sometimes perceived as an unwelcoming place.

The city that Dalya and Rudayna now inhabit is both familiar and unfamiliar to American viewers. Southern California teenage lifestyle is ubiquitous, but Dalya inhabits a very particular subset of this community—an Arab and Muslim immigrant world. The home life of most Muslims is very private, especially for women. I have been able to shoot with this family over an extended period of time and this has allowed me to get to know them, gain their trust, and gradually understand their issues and challenges in a deeper way. “Dalya’s Other Country” is made in the tradition of observational cinema, favoring intimate cinematography and an emphasis on placing the audience in close connection with the subject matter. The scenes are edited to immerse the viewers in Dalya and Rudayana’s world and create a human connection with the subjects so audiences understand the world from their perspective.