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MEET THE MENTOR—UAE Spotlight

Saturday October 7th, 2017

Speaker: **H.E. Sheikha Lubna bint Khalid Al Qasimi**

Facilitated by: **Sultan Al Qassemi**, Founder of Barjeel Art Foundation, UAE

Summary Paragraph

What role will teachers play in shaping the education initiatives aimed to enrich scientific and cultural content of the UAE's National Tolerance Programme? Tolerance is an intrinsic value of advanced societies, and is a skill that leads to opportunity and employability in an increasingly interconnected and networked global economy.

Keywords: Character Education

Key Points

Her Excellency, who was appointed in 2004 as the first female minister to join the UAE Cabinet and was recently appointed Minister of State for Tolerance, offered a wide-ranging glimpse into her professional and personal growth, her educational background, and her evolution as an individual, all of which have contributed to her current success.

She began by describing why she attributes her success in life to teachers: “17 or 18 years of our children’s lives are spent with teachers. My teachers were one of the reasons I became a software engineer in 1981, because of my passion for science. In high school, when I felt bored, I would solve complex mathematical equations.”

This passion led to a career in technology, where she was a conspicuous first: “I started as a software engineer as the first woman in the company. Everyone thought I was the secretary. Then I moved to IBM and other posts, and Dubai Ports. I was appointed as the first female Minister of Economy and Planning in 2004, not to beautify the cabinet, but to perform a difficult task.”





This step required her to fight self-doubt, she said: “moving to politics, I spent three years sleepless. I thought, ‘this will be so challenging, and there are so many expectations from the community.’ My appointment was highly controversial. I accepted the job, but I had doubts within myself. Then, at 4 in the morning, I started thinking, ‘our sheikhs gave me that position, and they trust me. So why should I worry?’ And my energy changed from being so worried to having positive energy.”

Sultan Al Qassemi asked, “how did you transform from the private to the public sector?”

“Going from technology into policy-making can be thought of as incorporating new software, or introducing an application to solve efficiency or productivity in the organization. Software engineers get a concept from the client about how to simplify procedures, and turn them into systems. In the cabinet, our main target is how to achieve happiness. Our job is to make sure all of our government functions are high quality, sustainable and continuous. I think my background in software helped me.”

“Were there challenges because you were always in the public eye?”

“I’m often asked this question, particularly in the West, about women’s challenges in the UAE. We didn’t really have a struggle for women, because we have laws that allow a balance and equality between women and men, and therefore women can be rewarded for their efforts, and assessments are based on results. The community is accepting of change, even if they are doubtful at the beginning.”

The moderator asked, “you spent a long time in California, a very open place where there are many liberties. How did that impact you and your character?”

“I graduated from college in 1975. All the subjects were in Arabic except for English literature. I went at first to the UK, where I had to do A-levels. At the time, two of my brothers lived in California in Berkeley, and in San Francisco. They said, ‘you should come to Silicon Valley, you will be able to work directly on computers.’ My parents asked me to live with an American family in the US and a British family in the UK because, as you know, we are used to living in families. What I gained from that was that the lady I lived with in California was like a second mother. I found a different perspective of the community because I lived with them. They are very kind people and they have their values. When I left home, I didn’t know how to wash my laundry. I would put all my colours in the same machine, and she taught me to separate the colours...she taught me how to do daily chores, how to cook for Thanksgiving, and that taught me how to depend on myself, and it liberated me. I didn’t feel there was any part of me that was incapable of doing certain things. And it nurtured love for others. You can learn from all people. Working in the government, I traveled a lot for conferences, and many of the people who were there would say to me, ‘I don’t feel you’re a





stranger.’ This phrase is like a bridge, because they see that you can speak their language and understand their logic, so it helps you to break the ice. This was essential in my success.”

Sultan Al Qassemi: “from your perspective, how can we prove that tolerance is measurable, and what is your greatest achievement since being appointed?”

“In February 2016, His Highness Sheikh Mohammed Bin Rashid, the Prime Minister, made his decision and said there would be new ministries introduced. What did he say about tolerance? He said we must rebuild; we need an intellectual restructuring that promotes tolerance, happiness and acceptance of others. Of course, the UAE is already tolerant. It hosts 200 nationalities. But now we must create a heritage. One of the pillars of the Ministry is Islam, another is the heritage of Sheikh Zayed, there are also international conventions that are ratified by the UAE, the history of UAE culture, connections between people, but nothing based on hostility, which I believe is an intruder in any community because people are not hateful.”

“We live in an era of many fluctuations. In the old days we used to learn our behaviors from our elders. We would coexist in the same family and learn from our teachers, parents and family, and these same mannerisms would go down the generations. But today this does not happen. Children are now getting it from everywhere. For what we see today is rising populism, taking the world by storm. I believe there is an erosion of values, not just in our community but in all communities. Turning tolerance into an institutionalized value means it will be part of the policy making process. Young people and families are the key focus in this programme.”

Sultan Al Qassemi: “what is the biggest challenge faced by the Ministry of Tolerance?”

“In the discussions about tolerance, we asked, ‘is it an international focus or a national agenda issue?’ We believe we are highly tolerant, but in some cases we disregard the pillars of tolerance in our daily lives. For instance, some of us might have a maid, and we say, ‘this maid is not a Muslim.’ So children learn that this is a critical value, and they begin to adopt it. So we have to focus on this value in our community, and use the proper language in front of children.”

“Teachers have been deeply influenced by the backgrounds they came from, and so we could have a teacher saying to a girl, your mother is a UAE national and your father is a British national, so you will end up in hell. Or a teacher will say, ‘you are wearing a cross, so you will end up in hell.’ But in Islam, you must believe in the Prophets Jesus and Moses. As Muslims we believe in all of those prophets, so why are some people using this language? So the Teachers Charter was launched, and all teachers have signed it. It focuses on respect for other religions and their upbringing, to ensure that teachers do not lose their influence. We also have the anti-discrimination law. There is also a similar charter for Imams, so we are getting back to key pillars for our vision, which are compassion and empathy.”





One delegate asked: “what are the current and future projects to raise tolerance in higher education and universities in the UAE?”

Her Excellency responded: “There are many universities that understand tolerance. There are volunteer programs to instill tolerance and empathy, such as International Peace Day and Tolerance Day. There is also, directed by His Highness Mohammed Bin Zayed, a new subject, which is ethical upbringing. It needs to be highlighted, instead of taking it as a given. He discussed this topic as a key one. These are beautiful values, and Zayed University is implementing these principles.”

“Speaking of challenges, some people use anonymous profiles to circulate fake news, and we need to raise awareness in this regard. This applies to parents and teachers as well. When you see a piece of news, you need to validate it. There are malicious rumours that stimulate hatred and negative feelings amongst the people. We need to combat this phenomenon in all sectors.”

Another delegate asked: “who are your role models?”

“I have several: I will speak about my stepping stone: I had so much passion in mathematics and physics, that once I was walking home thinking about it, and I told my mom, ‘I finally understand life.’ Life is all about physics. My teachers taught with passion. Also my brothers. When I left home, my eldest brother took me himself to the UK, and we flew to California. When I started working, I met Dr. Farouk Abbas, who was a geologist instrumental in the first moon landing. He managed to describe and teach the astronauts what kind of rocks they should take from the moon. What struck me was his humility. That was my role model. He always told me, ‘don’t be blinded by the limelight and the recognition. Stay true to yourself, being authentic about who you are. And be sure that is what kind of role model you want to be for others.’ It’s about how you can change people to do the right thing, to be better, to be bigger.”

Speaking to how tolerance can be measured, Her Excellency said, “how do we measure intangible values? One way is through surveying. When you talk about tolerance, it’s not just a catch phrase. It encompasses gender equality, ethnicity, opportunities, everything. From the internal arena, UAE has jumped from the eighth position to the third in terms of cultural aspects. In one of these organizations that does ranking, it came as number one worldwide. When I am introduced as a Minister of Tolerance, the comment is ‘that is progressive,’ thinking of a country that looks at the happiness and security of its residents.”

Question from the floor: “what are the values we should be maintaining in the Emirati community?”

“I’m talking about these values from the perspective of teachers. When I was volunteering as a professor at Zayed University, the first thing I started talking about was my teachers. I was a





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systems engineer, and what benefited me was the philosophy I learned from my teachers. I was passionate about technology and systems. Every single teacher spends more time with students than the time students spend with their families, so teachers influence students. So merely teaching curriculum is not enough. You also have to talk your own values, your own general knowledge. Teachers are the agents of change, which is the definition of your role.”

When asked, “what is the role of teachers to instill the values of coexistence and tolerance among their students,” Her Excellency responded, “every single day, if you are not positive at the beginning of the day, you cannot recover during the rest of the day. So to affect the community, you have to have a positive outlook. Younger people require even further attention from you. I hope that every one of us can sow the seeds of positive outcomes, and have empathy with others.”

Main Takeaway: Tolerance can be institutionalized through a partnership between government and educators.

