

Windows to the Soul

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: “A picture is worth a thousand words.” We’ve all heard that phrase before, and many of us have probably used it in various contexts. Unlike text, a single image has the capacity to convey multiple, and often complex ideas.

My guest today is Emirati documentary photographer Noura Al-Neyadi. Noura’s passion for using powerful imagery to tell stories has taken her all over the world, including the North Pole.

Her latest project is Eye Stories. At the height of the pandemic, Noura documented the heroic journey of 148 frontline healthcare workers, zooming in only on their eyes. For over three weeks, she visited five COVID-19 testing tents in Al-Ain and Abu-Dhabi and witnessed them work daily.

This project hit home for Noura, because her own mother works in healthcare. And like many others all over the world, she couldn’t see her for months.

During Health and Wellness Week at Expo 2020 Dubai, Noura discussed the importance of photography as a tool to humanize those who may otherwise be just a number.

Here’s an excerpt of her talk.

ARCHIVAL RECORDING

EXPO TALK: ...She’ll be sharing her story with us today, the stage is yours..”

NOURA AL-NEYADI: Thank you so much, Jesse. Hello everyone. My name is Noura Al-Neyadi. I come to you from Abu Dhabi... I was living the perfect life, the way I like to put it, before the pandemic hit. The perfect life to me is having a camera that is fully charged with an SD card. Fellow photographers can relate. So when the pandemic hit I was in my line of work. I completely didn't know what was happening. The visibility of masks around us was a new thing. So we were asked to stay at home. We were asked to follow certain rules that we did not know where they came from.

But something very interesting came out. One day I was driving from Al Ain to Abu Dhabi and I saw a giant tent, a giant white tent that has the slogan: "La sheloon ham," which is "Do not worry." So I was like, this is interesting because coming from the UAE, tents are a symbol of celebrating occasions and a social kind of event. Only to find out that, the very interesting invention for me, that these tents were put there for you to drive, just roll down the window, get your COVID test and then leave safely.

And I was like, this is very interesting. What kind of people would be staying in those tents, spending a lot of time, and at the same time, we'll put their life into pause? And those people actually left their houses, left their families and left their hobbies, their life, what they love. So I was like, I need to meet those faces.

I wanted to meet more of them. I want to see into their eyes and learn more. I love eyes so much. To me, eyes are a symbol of beauty. Not only that but eyes tell you the status of a person, their mental health. Are they happy? Are they worried? Are they determined? Are they strong? Do they need help?

And this is the first thing you spot. If someone needs help, if they fail to tell you that.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: On today's episode, we talk to Noura Al-Neyadi about family, photography, our post-pandemic world, and much more.

I'm Tariq Al Olaimy, and this is "People and Planet", a podcast from Expo 2020 Dubai's Programme for People and Planet, where changemakers from all over the world breakdown what it will take to create a sustainable future for our planet.

[INTRO STING]

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: So Noura, the language that you speak best is the language of photography. It's a language that is also your father's tongue. And from looking at the world from a bird's eye view to capturing the infinity of a human eye, you communicate that language of photography in the form of soul, feelings, energy, and also an incredible sense of humor.

And today we are delighted to be able to dive into your journey. Welcome Noura.

NOURA AL-NEYADI: Ahlan wa sahlam, Tariq. Thank you so much for having me. I love the introduction and I'm very excited for this journey.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Amazing. And I'd love to start with the beginning of your journey. So you were born in the Emirates, could you describe for me where you grew up? The building, the street, the sounds. And how are these images, maybe, different from today?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: I come from an oasis, known as Al Ain City, which is almost a two-hour drive from the capital Abu Dhabi. I grew up around an oasis, palm trees, dates. And beautiful sounds would be the waves whenever they play with the palm trees and the falaj system, which is the water network of irrigation that goes there.

The beautiful, soft sound of the water along with camels and cattles all over — that kind of feeling.

MUSIC

NOURA AL-NEYADI: And my most precious moment would be with my grandparents — both sides of my parents. Just to get to spend time with them and be part of their majlises in which they hosted people and welcomed people. And this contributed a lot in me being able to develop or have this deep understanding and feeling and analysis to people’s feelings and emotions at a very young age.

MUSIC

NOURA AL-NEYADI: And I can easily recall, my grandma would be sitting, sipping coffee and telling some poems about beautiful things that they're loved or things that they miss. I got to spend a lot of time with my grandparents growing up. And I'm an elder daughter, so I took care of the pack growing up. And that was also a very great contribution towards, I think, being responsible about making sure to check people’s feelings from time to time.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And how different are some of these images and sounds today? How has Al Ain evolved?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: I can easily tell you, Tariq, that growing up I was fortunate enough to travel around for my studies, and travel more for photography as well. And I remember the very first time I traveled alone, it was for a Bachelor program I was taking. I was 19 years old, never left Al-Ain, let alone leaving the UAE. It was a great adventure to be able to see the world. And it just developed another perspective into my life. But, I think a big part of my soul is back in the oasis.

And whenever I want to recall the strength, especially the emotional strength, to deal with life. I can't tell you that a lot has changed, but the oasis is still there. The beautiful angles of what makes Al-Ain City is still there. However, people, older people that I grew up around, have left this world, but they never left my world actually, because I made sure to document them with my camera. And this is mainly why I love photography. Whenever I miss someone, I'll just dive into my album and I can easily recall the smell, the texture, the sounds, the feeling of that moment. And this is the power of photography.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: I wonder... Do you remember some of the most memorable photos that you ever took?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: Well, that's a bit of a hard question, but I think I can do it. Now, every photograph that I take — while taking, before taking, during taking, and after taking — I like to treat them as like my unborn kids. And I cannot tell you, I have a personal favorite photograph, but I think I do have one that is on the top of it: One that I took of the hands of my grandma. Since my grandfather passed away, which is in 2017. I never saw my grandmother celebrating life or having henna on her hands, which is a symbol of celebration and celebrating life women wear in the UAE, with colorful clothes, golden stuff. So it was springtime, and I remember sitting with her outside and enjoying just an outing; and there was coffee and some dates and stuff. And, I saw her hands with henna. And to me, it was an open invite to celebrate life back again. And I couldn't not take a photo of her hands.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Beautiful. And you know, you speak to the importance of those photos in your family history. And I wonder, in the history of the human family, are there any photos that have influenced your passion for photography?

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Photography was never on the table. It was not something that struck me before. I grew up seeing and getting to watch my father wander around with his film camera. And he used to timelessly, make sure to document everything: the streets, the park, new buildings, new cars, people, everything. And I remember he would make sure to stop on the side road, and we would be bored to hell, and he would just stop and make sure to take that photo. I never cared for it. I never saw it as important. And it was never something that actually was of my interest.

Until one day, he took me with him to the shop that he used to go to develop his films. So he made me sit down and open the envelope and go through the photographs. And I was just dazzled, like, “Can you really do that with a camera, actually freeze moments, and feelings, and people, and time, and events, and light of the day, and things?”

And it just hit me, the crazy power a camera holds. And from that day I was like, I just need a camera, I don't know how to shoot. And I was 11 I think, around that. But he made sure to give me a used one. He would never give me one of his new ones. So I went around shooting. Ever since I would never stop up to now.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: I love that. And at 11 years old and beyond, were there any images or photos from history — so outside of your family — that drew you closer and closer to this field and craft?

MUSIC

NOURA AL-NEYADI: So my father has a big collection of old National Geographic magazines from the eighties, seventies, and sixties. And it's one of the most protected collections in our house. And going through them before bed, I would

always imagine myself traveling to all the countries and seeing all those people and those animals and those angles of topics I never understood back then.

And I was like: “What if I got to be able to travel the world with my camera, take all these photos?” And it’s funny because this is what I ended up doing. A lot of your childhood dreams are a very good leader. They lead you towards the path you’re supposed to take. And if you just trust yourself, your passion, and a great deal of risk, let me tell you: you’re there.

MUSIC

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And in your Expo talk for Health and Wellness Week, you talked about that light bulb moment where you realized that you wanted to do a photo project about frontline healthcare workers. Can you walk us through that and why you chose to focus on eyes?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: I’ve always found eyes as a sign of beauty. My grandma used to say that you can easily tell a person by their eyes. And growing up, being an adult, going into the outside world, doing my academic life, my career life now, there is no better indicator than the eyes. And this is where the eyes’ beauty is. It’s not because they had beautiful eyes. [laughs] Well, not necessarily that.

But if you’re feeling a certain emotion your eyes can project them wisely. And especially if you were conversing with someone who took the time to crack you up and make you feel good and give you that safe space to talk about yourself, you could easily have your soul shining.

MUSIC

NOURA AL-NEYADI: So I was like, I was just curious to meet and see eyes that chose with pleasure and happiness to just pause their life and go serve in these screening centers.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And as much as there's courage from the healthcare worker society, it also sounds like there's a lot of courage to be in those spaces also from your end. And I wonder if you can speak to us through maybe the mental journey, the resilience that it actually requires to go from center to center, from place to place, where you're also exposing yourself, but you're also witnessing something that's quite unique to the human experience?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: Looking back and going through the talk of it, explaining it more, it was never as easy as it sounded. Nothing of that project was easy. And I was already at work and I had to just sign out of my life for a month and make sure to stay away from my family and everyone that I cared for for one full month. It was so easy saying this to myself. But while executing that and carrying on with the project, it started to take a mental toll on me.

My main concern was not photography or taking photos or making sure that the portraits are as good as they sound. It was making sure nobody is harmed. And a couple of my friends who I spoke to about the project, they were like, "You're crazy. You're on your own. Just don't do it." And deep inside, they know that I'm a very, let's say, stubborn person. When I have something in my mind, I'm just... I don't care. It just needs to happen. It needs to happen. So I went out of my way testing before visiting each center, waiting for the results to make sure to go to visit while quarantining throughout the month.

And the clock is ticking and I was trying to carry on the project. Ramadan started and I had to stay away from my family. And I remember the two weeks of this

month I was doing the project fasting, but nothing ever prepared me for what I saw in these screening centers. I was like, I'm fully prepared in my gown and protected and everything with my camera and all of that. But I got to meet people who have not seen their families for a while, who are mentally exhausted. And I was like, having a monologue with myself: Noura this is not something usually you've ever done before. It's not only the pandemic, but the mental status of these people. And I was like: Listen, let's go to the basics, humans like someone to look them in the eye and ask them about their day.

They would start opening up to you and realize your value as a human when you start connecting with people, looking into their eyes, asking them about their day, what they have for breakfast, their favorite movie and stuff like that. And that was my very first day of shooting coming up with this. And I have to tell you that carrying on with the project, I really wanted to stop because being in all of that and going through that alone, it was very exhausting.

MUSIC

NOURA AL-NEYADI: But when I saw that they were actually happy, it was an exercise for them to let out everything they felt. And when they start having that, I felt accountable. To be a breeze of fresh air in the middle of a chaos... Like a hectic, crazy situation.

They left me with beautiful stories that I will never forget. Beautiful eyes that spoke courage, hope. Some of them got teary, but they were so beautiful. Once in a lifetime project.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And you've spoken so beautifully about the generational bridges, that photography is able to build across time from past to present. And,

when it comes to Expo 2020, its motto is, "Connecting Minds and Creating the Future." And I wonder what role does photography and visual storytelling play as it relates to this theme for Expo?

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Walking around Expo you got to see things and moments we thought as humankind were taken away from us, of people interacting of different backgrounds, being there, blending nicely and safely, most importantly, talking about all sorts of topics. You literally have the whole world here.

It fed my soul, which was so hungry for traveling. It felt like taking an airplane, traveling all over the world around Expo. The way I look at it, it's just a very loud, gentle, beautiful invite to the whole world to tell the whole world that hope is there. Us as humans are so beautiful, we can do impossible things. And we're all right. Yes. We're going through a pandemic. Yes, things have changed. Things are hard, but come around and Expo. Just walk around, and see everything. It's enough to cleanse your soul from the hardship of the pandemic, let's say.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: How do you balance being a so-called "objective bystander" while also trying to convey the emotion of the people whose stories you want to tell? Especially when you're part of that story itself. Should we convey our own emotions as a photographer, or do you have a different view on that?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: I would say, again, back to the same kind of framework: you need to know what you're doing. You need to have a strong, valid cause and goal, and then you start flying from there. ***MUSIC starts*** And I think as a photographer, it's not about holding a camera and striking a photo or taking that snap and that's it. It's more than that. You need to develop that strong ground with whatever you're shooting. They need to sense that you know what you're doing, and there's someone they trust talking to, looking into their eyes and smiling too.

Only then they will agree to reveal their soul to you.

And I remember I was interviewing a lady who lost her husband in a pandemic. And she was like: "I don't want you to take my photo like this. I want to smile because if I got to bring this photo and show it to my husband, I want him to feel proud of me." And that hit me so much that I'm talking to people, who actually lost loved ones in a pandemic. It is something so vulnerable and packed with feelings. But you also need to be confident with a gentle smile because doing a project in a place where it's devastated by the amount of emotions we have, you need to be a safe lighthouse.

So everyone would just scatter around you and have a big smile: "Yes. This is the lady with the camera and she's back again. What do you want to know about me now?" That was, I think, the feeling that also saved me mentally. And I didn't want people to see me the way I was mentally exhausted, but those feelings and daily stories I was hearing and eyes, I think they were the safe lights that made me through and go through with the project. Again, we're humans, whatever they are. Wherever we are in life, we help each other.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: And on that closing note, I wonder if you could leave us with one last thought. What should we photograph? Whether it's from Expo to hospitals, what should our photos attempt to communicate?

NOURA AL-NEYADI: I would say, I would twist your question to something else. I would just want to start by saying never take anything for granted, ever.

MUSIC

It could be your favorite mug, Tariq, that while recording, you just did one move, and poof, you lost it. It could be anything else in life that means so much to you, but you're used to having it around all the time. And it could be a feeling. It could be a human, an object, a pet or something you like. Whatever you feel, whatever you love. Whatever that is there for you all the time.

Now going through a post-pandemic world or recovering from the pandemic, our minds need to be on the same page. We're recovering now, and the best recovery is a flood of positive messages and feelings, understanding, and love. And this is how we come back together, happily with hope after a pandemic.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you for being a safe lighthouse and the chaos of this world. And well, beauty is in the eye of the holder. May you continue to have an eye that is always able to behold and capture beauty everywhere you go. Thank you so much for spending this time with us today.

NOURA AL-NEYADI: Thank you so much for taking interest in my project. Thank you for your beautiful questions.

TARIQ AL-OLAIMY: Thank you Noura. People and Planet is an official podcast of Expo 2020 Dubai. Creating a sustainable future for our planet, together.

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