

Oral history interview with Mohammed Hashim conducted by Ruth Belay

13 December, 2019

00:00:00 **Ruth Belay**

So today is December 12th?

00:00:04 **Mohammed Hashim**

13th.

00:00:05 **Ruth**

13th yeah. 13th. So, if you'd like to state your name and the year that you graduated from U of T?

00:00:11 **Mohammed**

Mohammed Hashim. I'm not exactly sure of the year that I graduated to be honest. Because, I did it part time slowly towards the end. I started in 1998.

00:00:24 **Ruth**

OK. So, can you tell me a little bit about your life before coming to U of T?

00:00:31 **Mohammed**

Sure, yeah. I was born in Canada. At six my father passed away so my mom decided to move myself and my sister back to Pakistan. Where we would have the support of her family and ours, I mean our entire family. So, I was there from 7 to 14. And at 14, she decided that we needed to have a Canadian education. So, she brought us back. I started in grade nine, my sister started in grade 11. And then we lived in Mississauga. We went to Clarkson Secondary School. And in '98 I started U of T.

00:01:20 **Ruth**

Right. So, tell me a little bit about, I guess the community work that you did before going to U of T?

00:01:28 **Mohammed**

I did no community work [laughs] before coming to U of T.

00:01:29 **Ruth**

OK.

00:01:30 **Mohammed**

U of T was like the beginning of all that side and I wasn't involved with any community organizations or I was just working part time jobs and going to school.

00:01:41 **Ruth**

OK, and why U of T, or specifically why UTM [University of Toronto Mississauga]?

- 00:01:47 **Mohammed**
I went to UTM because we lived in Mississauga. And I wanted to stay relatively close to my mom, who was a single mom. And I thought it was important for us to kind of be relatively close. My sister went there. Many of my cousins went there. So, that's why UTM.
- 00:02:06 **Ruth**
And tell me a little bit about your first impressions of U of T?
- 00:02:12 **Mohammed**
UTM was like, I had a lot of friends that went to UTM as well. So, it was a bit, I mean it was a new sense of freedom that I found. My first couple of years were, compared to high school, were I got to do what I wanted to do. And pay attention to what I wanted to pay attention to and take the courses that I wanted to. So, I was a bit – it was quite liberating, a bit too liberating, in my opinion. But it was yeah, that's how I felt in the beginning.
- 00:02:49 **Ruth**
And what was it like being on campus?
- 00:02:54 **Mohammed**
Yeah, I think, back in the days it was a very small campus. So, there were not that many people. I think it was around 4000 people at the time. And yeah, I mean it was really friendly. People were always kind and I had a really good campus experience my first two years. And then I took a year off. And then when I came back, is when I started getting involved with different things.
- 00:03:29 **Ruth**
So, what were the different things that you were involved in?
- 00:03:32 **Mohammed**
I'll give you a quick list. I started an organization called Break Down Social Barriers, like a student club on campus. That was in the 2001-2002 school year. And then the following year 2002-2003 I was elected to the board of directors of SAC [Student Administrative Council] at the time. And then subsequently, from the board directors, they had a commissioner position for University Affairs. So, I did the University Affairs position for 2002-2003. 2003-2004 I got elected to the Vice-President UTM position. And also, a member of Governing Council.
- 00:04:29 **Ruth**
OK. So, the Break Down Social Barriers organization. Why did you feel the need to start that organization up?
- 00:04:36 **Mohammed**
Back then it was a time for the anti-globalization movement. And to be honest, I think one of my main motivations was a friend of mine, named Radu who was, I think he's like a statistician now for Stats Canada, but he was deeply into like wanting to protest and being an

activist and organizing. And I liked people. So, the year that I took off to discover what I wanted to do, and what I didn't want to do, because I originally wanted to be an accountant, that was my goal going into university. And then when I came back in 2001, I - just before the school started, I got a full year to kind of think about what I wanted to do. And then before the school year started, I registered the club, with four of my friends, and then, we just started organizing.

00:05:49 **Ruth**

And as part of that organizing, what were you guys doing?

00:05:52 **Mohammed**

Well, we were trying to raise awareness around free trade versus fair trade back then. That was how the Global South was being used and abused by multinational corporations plus the World Trade Organization. And how neo-liberal policies of trickle-down economics, were not only hurting people in the South, but also hurting people here in Canada and in the western world. Yeah, so we started holding different events where we had, where we just started bringing people together and talking about those things. And that was like we - I think our first thing was a pub night, to be honest. And we, it happened I think on September 14th -ish in 2001.

00:06:54 **Ruth**

OK.

00:06:55 **Mohammed**

And, but everything shifted after 9/11. So, we had created this organization to kind of talk about everything from global warming to economic policy. And then when 9/11 happened, we thought something terrible had happened, but we didn't really fully understand the implications of what that would look like, until much later. And then we started yeah, so we first started talking about how - we did some newsletters, we had some events on campus. And then like having late October, November when the war against Afghanistan started, we held a mock funeral on campus for peace and democracy. And yeah, it was freezing cold.

But that kind of- set a stage to being - and the reason why I started, not like me, me and a few of my friends started that club, was because we didn't feel there was any activism on campus. There was like nothing. The student unions at the time were just kind of doing social events and getting people together that way and building a sense of community through activities and just like social activities. And we felt - they were very focused on campus issues and we felt that there was a void to be able to organize around issues that were beyond campus. Especially from a progressive point of view.

00:08:45 **Ruth**

Did you feel like after 9/11 there was – as part of this club, and as part as probably a lot of different movements that were coming up, that there was that spark that was reinvigorated on campus?

00:08:57 **Mohammed**

I think like that whole time was very high energy in terms of activism. Because before that, there was a protest in Seattle, and then in Quebec City against free trade, and those were very highs, within like a very progressive organizing moment. And then we were just catching the tail end of that. But yeah, it was a big success. In our first year of existence, we won the Club of the Year. Because we were doing so many different things. And yeah, we were just constantly bringing people together and pushing and finding new people to kind of be active and we did lots of class-speaks and was kind of random for a club to go do class-speaks, but we would do those, because we wanted to get people involved in stuff.

00:09:57 **Ruth**

So, what are class-speaks?

00:09:59 **Mohammed**

Just going in front of a class and speaking.

00:10:01 **Ruth**

Oh, OK.

00:10:01 **Mohammed**

Saying, “hi, my name is Mohamed. I’m from this club. I want to invite you to this thing. This is what we’re doing, this is why we’re doing it.” And yeah, like towards – at the beginning of the following year, there was a rally at Queens Park, to reduce tuition fees. And it was run by the Canadian Federation of Students. And I thought, “hey, that’s a good idea.” And then I got introduced to a guy named Alex Kerner, who was the SAC President at the time. He won through a by-election that year because of what happened to the previous one. And he was like, yeah you need to help get involved in this rally. And I said, “OK.” And much to my annoyance, none of the student unions at UTM were taking that up. They decided to just sit it out and not participate in the rally, so I was like well, like the club could do it. So, we organized for the rally. We had lots of class-speaks around that. And lots of flyering around that and a lot of organizing around that. And that kind of made me super annoyed about how people at the student union, who had resources to do some stuff, were just like sitting by the side and not pulling their weight on that. Which led me to the following election where I think Alex Kerner again, asked me to run for the board directors at UTM, and I won. And I won. I think they had seven candidates, I mean seven people that could, seven spots to fill. And I can’t remember how many candidates were running, but a couple or more, so the chances were pretty decent for me to get in.

00:12:17 **Ruth**

Yeah.

00:12:18 **Mohammed**

I don't think it was too hard, but yeah. So that's what happened. That's what happened at the student union movement, which was that.

00:12:29 **Ruth**

I'm just going back a little bit. When you were holding, I guess, like one of the biggest events that you talked about was the mock funeral for peace and democracy. Could you tell me more about that?

00:12:39 **Mohammed**

Yeah. We put up tombstones across campus, but also in this one central area. And then we had speeches that were very anti-war and that was pretty much it. It was, I think maybe 60, 70 people there. So, it wasn't big but like compared to what was happening on campus in terms of activism, we felt that was pretty big. So, we felt - the first time you organize something and you take ownership of it, and people come to it, because they want to be part of it, it's an empowering experience. You're like wow, this is an idea that other people might think is a good one. And sometimes, some people catch a bug from it to say, "hey, I can do more of this." I think, and then some people don't.

I definitely that year realized I like bringing people together around issues and demonstrating a little bit of leadership, but also creating a space for other people to rise and have their voices projected. That was fun. It was fun and yeah. And it was nice because people heard you. And you had an opinion to share, and people were like, "oh, that's a fair opinion to share, I kind of agree with it." And once they say they agree with that, they either come along or they don't, but I mean, vast majority of people don't. Or they'll just hear that and say, "OK, yeah whatever." But some people are like, "yeah, I want to get involved too."

And what we found that, through all those different events, we picked up more and more people. And more people got involved, and wanted to get further involved, it kind of spiralled into its own life.

00:14:38 **Ruth**

What did it mean to you and your other friends to know that you guys had created this network that now is growing?

00:14:59 **Mohammed**

Yeah, it was cool. I mean we want - at least we started to hang out with people, right, it was university. So it was good to have a larger circle of people to hang out with. And the campus news was covering the stuff that we were doing. So, yeah, it was empowering. It felt empowering because when you're fighting for ideas and other people, either buy in to those ideas or don't, the fight allows you to

see where people are at. And sometimes when people come along it's really empowering to say, "hey, it's a good fight to be part of."

00:15:45 **Ruth**

For the - I know UTM is a far more diverse campus then – similar to UTSC [University of Toronto Scarborough] in its space, how did that influence the work that you guys were doing?

00:15:47 **Mohammed**

I'm sure it did. It didn't feel that much. Because there was a lot of people of colour there. So, there was a bit of natural expectation that no matter like who runs, there will be a level of diversity that's probably there in existence. Even in '98 there was, it was quite diverse. It didn't feel like – at that time to me at least, it didn't feel like we are breaking ground in terms of diversity. I think we were breaking ground in terms of progressive ideas but I don't, it never felt like we were breaking grounds with diversity there.

00:16:45 **Ruth**

And having that diverse lived experience, it does tend to inform the work that you are doing and your interests and having that connection abroad and how you said that -

00:17:00 **Mohammed**

I don't know about that.

00:17:01 **Ruth**

No, it didn't?

00:17:02 **Mohammed**

I mean like it wasn't – I'm sure that's for other people definitely, in the case for me it wasn't. I mean my friend Radu was Romanian, but he and I were both born here. I think both of our families have burnt the ships that we came in on. Not literally, but like it's, we're here and that's kind of where we - and then there's another guy named Damian Waddell, who is also part of it. And Nick Marincovic, were like the four originals. and yeah, I mean, so I didn't feel like – I think that there was, like in terms of how - there was a lot of racialized folks that were involved, off campus already. Not a lot of them were involved with progressive politics. Progressive politics was a pretty white thing to be part of back then. And that felt narrow, but I didn't feel – yeah.

00:18:11 **Ruth**

So, for the organization, as you guys moved past the first year and were going into a second year, I guess were current, like - the anti-war movement, how was that shaping the organization's mandate?

00:18:25 **Mohammed**

A lot, yeah. I mean then after that I, we've, we went to a whole ton of rallies from New York to Montreal to Ottawa to – we just organized rallies. We were like, "oh, there's a big thing happening in New York

City, who wants to go?" And then we'd just figure out a way to get somebody to drive. And then jump in a car and then pool some money together and stay at somebody's house or pay for gas or whatever. Yeah, we all kind of like – I think I went to a rally in Ottawa and – this was around the time Mike Harris was around too by the way. So, we were also rallying against Mike Harris. So, there was like, there was just these big days of action that were happening at the time against like neoliberalism, so we just kind of tapped into all of them.

Because October 6th was a big rally in Toronto, we organized for that. And then – I think that was the day Mike Harris resigned. But yeah, we were there for that. And we brought people there. And yeah, we kind of had like a bit of like a – I guess some people had a bit of an activist, like an anarchist tint as well. So, I was like, you know we want to go be there in the front lines of radicalism and rally for I guess, against neoliberalism. Yeah, that's what it felt like.

00:20:00 **Ruth**

OK. And then as you were now starting to get into student politics, I guess how did that work intersect with the organization?

00:20:10 **Mohammed**

Well, so what I – so finally when I got elected, and subsequently to the University Affairs Commissioner position, that was an almost full-time position downtown. So that full year I was downtown. So, the friends carried on Break Down at UTM. And to varying levels of success. And then the year after, when I went back to UTM and ran for the VP UTM position, which was like the main position for SAC at UTM. Like it was just recently created - somewhat recently created. And yeah, I think that was the first time they had a VP position for UTM. Before that it was Commissioners.

So, when I went back, is when I think the club folded because everybody who was part of the club, just kind of went to student union. So even though I was like maybe - there was a handful of us that got elected. We created different tiers. So, we created these ministries. Ministry of Social Justice, and Ministry of the Environment, and ministry of whatever we could find, really. And we slotted people into that. And through that, they started having their meetings and getting - and growing.

00:21:54 **Ruth**

So, what were they able to do through, I guess this new organization of the student movement?

00:22:00 **Mohammed**

In the long run of things, I think the campus turned into a progressive campus. Because after that, the people that came that were, that found their voice through those moments and through that activism that - so the space that was created back then, they – many of them

stayed and many of them went further within their unions' movements. And - but yeah, so I believe like the team of folks that were involved back then, helped shift, started to shift the politics at UTM. Yeah, I think the real shift eventually came to bare in the 2007-08 year. But, yeah.

00:23:05 **Ruth**

Can you tell me more about your commissioner position when you were here at St. George?

00:23:09 **Mohammed**

Yeah, I was - it was a really different environment for me to be downtown versus UTM. So, it took a while just to get my bearings and understand who's who and realize the reliability of our impermanence, for university administrators to use that to ignore us. And I was like, "hold on a second, we are elected, you got to listen to us." And they're like, "yeah, let's take this into consideration." And then nothing would move. And then we would make bigger stinks and if the stink was big enough, they would potentially move. But it was a lot of just like - it was a lot of just carrying on of normal business. And then we just kind of added different layers. So, social justice weeks, like this week, and that week. Like an environment week. Some things were historical and some things were creative, that we did. But yeah, it was definitely not ground-taking [laughs]. But there was one thing that happened big that year, when I was downtown, there was a referendum to join the CFS [Canadian Federation of Students]. So that was the first time U of T had a referendum. And I was on the yes side for - I think the vote came down to - there was a full referendum and then I had to get ratified and I'm like - or the referendum needed to be mandated by the annual general meeting and then - so it was like a board of directors and general meetings, and then referendum and the application of the referendum, and so there was all those different things. And that was when CFS first came on campus.

00:25:15 **Ruth**

And why were you an advocate for CFS being part of U of T?

00:25:20 **Mohammed**

Because I believe in collectivism. And I thought that being part of a larger group of students allowed us a clear voice. Also, allowed us the opportunity to cross-pollinate. And learn from others and take some and teach some. And it was - and it just felt, yeah. I think at first, I was a bit of a tentative supporter, because some of the personalities I wasn't too keen on [laughs], but I was definitely on the 'yes' side. And then as I grew through the student movement, my affinity to the CFS grew deeper.

00:26:17 **Ruth**

And have you seen that - what were some of the benefits, I guess, of that partnership?

00:26:26 **Mohammed**

I think, I mean, like when we did the rally, the government responds. So even if they don't necessarily change right away, there's a duty to respond that people find both provincially, but also the ramifications are local as well. So, we're fighting for tuition reductions provincially, when the vote comes to Governing Council for tuition increases, we can't just stay silent, we've got to organize there too. And then the University has to kind of justify why tuition increases are necessary. And sometimes when they were being flagrant about it, and I think that year when I was EPUA [?] they increased. I think that was the year when medicine and law became deregulated, so their tuitions went from like 6,000 to a projected 20,000 per year.

And then there were lots of people from the legal community, including the Chancellor of the University, who spoke out against it. And we had reached out to a number of people, many people of the Governing Council and others who are definitely better connected than I, reached out to people, and they added a lot of voice. It was painful for the University to have to go through those changes, in terms of a public persona of that. Because especially for law and medicine which are seen as such important functions of society, for them to make it less accessible to people, financially, was a statement.

And we were able to highlight that statement that they were making, in a way that they at least had to feel a little bit of shame when they moved it forward. It still passed, but it put - those moments create systemic checks. So, the people who are working within the environment - are like OK, maybe we don't want to do it so fast next time or maybe we want to do it a little slower. OK, well if we're doing it, if we're doing this and probably shouldn't have done it this quickly then maybe we should give up a little bit here or there. So, in terms of when you look at what does a rally do, and you think of well, we went out there and rallied and that was the end of it. It's not true, because the environment sees what's happening, understands that there's a building voice of agony around it, and then tries to figure out a way, atleast a somewhat more reasonable way to move things forward in what they want to do, don't get me wrong, they're going to still do what they want to do, but try to be a bit more reasonable around it. I found that to be true when I was there.

00:29:23 **Ruth**

So earlier you had kind of mentioned, I guess, the issues of being an elected official as a student who's dealing with the institution. Obviously, there's change and sometimes the institution has chosen to ride it out and not responded on certain issues. But how - what was the institutional response for some of these issues, when you guys were trying to push it forward?

00:29:53 **Mohammed**

I think university administrators have a set plan of what they want to do. And they consult to the degree they want to be able to say they've consulted and that seems disingenuous. I think many good people work in the university environment and want to do better. I just think that also the universities have plans that they need to implement. And yeah, so I mean like I think people hear you out, you build relationships with different people and you try to find fair balances in different conversations. And most of the time the university will do what they want to and in small circumstances, they'll compromise here and there and that's the student-life struggle.

00:30:47 **Ruth**

Have you seen a shift or a change in any way, I guess?

00:30:53 **Mohammed**

Well, I think the team of Student Affairs at UTM, who was there when I first started this, is still there today. So, in terms of senior management on systemic approaches towards dealing with change, are probably fairly consistent, at least at UTM. And - but I think that's institution-wide. It's mostly - it's a give and take, and I wouldn't say that it's a balanced equation. Because 95% of the time the universities have most of the power to do what they want to. And they only react to fire. And as a student union, our job is to create fire, large enough for them to react to.

00:31:53 **Ruth**

So, when you moved back to UTM in an elected position, were you able to, I guess, kind of bring that era of student activism back to the council? How were you able to --?

00:32:06 **Mohammed**

Oh yeah, I mean I didn't stay downtown because I thought it was bit of a cesspool there, to be honest. It was just a completely different vibe as inter-college beefs, there's like SAC versus different college beefs. There's like, we talk about this - the complexity of the insanity here. Downtown is so great that the ability to get lost is only inevitable. So, I wanted to go back home to be able to take what I learned here and out, and actually try to build. So that's why I stepped back into UTM.

00:32:54 **Ruth**

So, what was that building process like at UTM?

00:32:58 **Mohammed**

It was awesome. I mean the majority of the people who got elected as part of the team, they all got elected at UTM, which was great. So, we convinced people to run and they ran and they won. And then from that cadre successive of people who will kind of come through the same organizing methodology year after year, I think are still there now.

- 00:33:28 **Ruth**
And as - that's obviously a very important legacy to leave behind, to have that student activism and being imbedded within the student union.
- 00:33:39 **Mohammed**
Nah, no I mean like there's - I mean I created a little bit of a window there. There was a bit more space for people. And then I was lucky enough that there were really good people at the time who were like, "hey, this is an interesting space, let use this space to do what we want to do." And then they used that space to find their own voices and then they built their own and they built their own. I take no credit in trying to say that kind of thing. I honestly believe that when you create space, for people to kind of enter into, some people will take it, some people won't. Whoever takes it, let them take it and take it any way they want to.
- 00:34:23 **Ruth**
So, what were some of the – your priorities that you guys had set out that year?
- 00:34:28 **Mohammed**
Oh, I think it was defeat the parking fee increase. It was monumental stuff [laughing]. And then yeah, there was - I can't even remember to be honest. Oh, there was a new levy that was being implemented by the University, for the athletics centre. And they played some pretty messy politics around that in order to make it work, obviously, they got what they wanted to. Because also back then we only had one out of the five student unions on campus. Five or four? Five student unions. About five student unions on campus. And yeah, so we only had one. So, we were definitely going to be beaten on that vote. But we still mobilized and tried to talk to people about it.
- 00:35:28 **Ruth**
Can you tell me a little bit about the structure of other unions?
- 00:35:33 **Mohammed**
I can't remember when the legislation was passed, but I think within the U of T Act there's mention or legislation that outlines that all student, all non-academic incidental fees are to be approved, any rate of increase above inflation, is to be increased only through a student majority. Student vote majority. However, the University is also unilaterally allowed to increase without student majority for a temporary basis. So, you get that?
- 00:36:15 **Ruth**
Yeah, so they're able to temporary increase but then -
- 00:36:18 **Mohammed**
So, for example, so we had this – the committee called Quality Services for Students, QSS. And there's only five student votes on it, or

something along those lines. And each of the student unions had one vote on it. And the administration wants to come up there and say, "well, we need to increase, we need to introduce a levy of a \$150 per person, per year for the new gym building." And they might say, "OK well..." - or the students might say, "well, no we have a problem with that." And they can vote it down. And then the University might still introduce it. It's been harder to do those big things, because then people can say that the University's out of mandate.

But on smaller things for example, like career centres or health services on campus, let's just say their levy is \$100 per year. If they come – they have a committee, a consultative committee of students that say, "you know, I think next year's levy should be 2.5%." The administration sits with those students to kind of explain in the lead up to those votes, why that 2.5% is justifiable. But then when it comes to the vote, if the students are at loss of a majority, then it will fail and then, so technically the fee stays up at \$100, but the University can put a 2.5% increase, which is greater than inflation, I would say at that time. And they would go to 102.50, but only for three years.

And then - so that's their ride it out strategy. So, then they are like, "OK well.." the following year they'll come and say, "OK here," – it fails again, let's just say, they increase it to 105 but the permanent fee is at a 100. And on third year they're like, "look, if we reduce it to - we don't have approval for 102.50 and they get to 105 and this year we need to get a 107.5, because we need to make sure that we have extra enrolment and we need to grow," and yada, yada, yada. "If you guys don't approve this, then we'll have to fall back to \$100 and we would have to let go of a number of our services and staff. Which ones do you guys think we should get rid of?" And then students are like we don't want to get rid of anything.

And they're like, "well, then you have to vote for that 107.5 to make it permanent." And they'll introduce it when they know they have the votes. So, then they increase it in year two or year three, depending on when they know they have the votes. And then this way they still get what they want, over a longer period of time. And we think that we're fighting the system by voting it down, even for like a number of years.

00:39:36

Ruth

OK. So, as a student union exec at UTM, what was your relationship like with other campuses, like Scarborough or St. George? Was there unity around -?

00:39:47

Mohammed

Yeah. I did a lot of work at UTSC when I was the University Affairs Commissioner, because that was the year that UTSC had a referendum to leave SAC. And I was the one who was helping UTSC from a downtown exec position to say, "it makes sense for you guys to leave." I'm not too sure if that was a good idea at the end of the day,

to be honest. I think that there's definitely - UTM has definitely benefitted from a SAC relationship, a UTMSU SAC relationship. Or UTSC or UTMSU relationship. So, I think UTM has gotten quite a bit. And I think that it's - UTM has helped UTSU as well. Because UTSU... the St. George campus is so convoluted.

Some of the years you'll have right wing people, and some years you'll have frat boys, and some years you'll have Trinity [Trinity College] folks, it's all over the place. But UTM had been relatively consistent in terms of us being progressive politics. So like UTSU survived a number of years because their elections were together for the UTSU slate, because people at UTM still voted for it. And then even at progressive slates lost downtown, they were won by such a large margin at UTM that they will remain in power. So we were officially inflating UTSU progressiveness.

00:41:29 **Ruth**

But, was there any benefits that UTSC got from I guess that separation or was there-?

00:41:34 **Mohammed**

Their money.

00:41:35 **Ruth**

They got money, OK.

00:41:36 **Mohammed**

Yeah, so they got all the money that SAC was receiving and they got to keep it for themselves.

00:41:42 **Ruth**

OK. And I guess through that, with - was there still unity I guess, even after they separated was there unity on the front of like, OK there's a social issue that we're both going to focus on, or we're going to fight student fees together, or -?

00:41:57 **Mohammed**

Up and down.

00:41:59 **Ruth**

OK.

00:42:00 **Mohammed**

I think up and down. They also became part of CFS, so that became another conduit for them to remain part of - partially progressive and, I think that they mostly have been progressive I believe, since then. But honestly, I don't know for sure, because other than that year I spent kind of helping them divorce SAC, after that I didn't really stay in touch with too many people.

00:42:34 **Ruth**

OK.

00:42:35 **Mohammed**
On that campus, yeah.

00:42:38 **Ruth**
So, it seems like you got to work on a lot of different, cool decisions as Commissioner. Is there anything else that you worked on that will be important to mention?

00:42:48 **Mohammed**
I think there were two folks. There was a guy named Mike Foderick and Sean Mullin and Mike Foderick, primarily. They were the main instigators of creating the TTC [Toronto Transit Commission] discounted fare pass. So, you know how UTS used to buy the –

00:43:15 **Ruth**
Yeah.

00:43:16 **Mohammed**
And then, they used to buy bulk passes and then sell them out at discounted rates? That happened, that started - that conversation started that year, by I think, Mike Foderick, he was one of main proponents who had relationships with City Council to try to move that thing forward. And subsequently in the years after, they were able to make it happen.

00:43:44 **Ruth**
And we're still having those conversations today.

00:43:48 **Mohammed**
Are we?

00:43:49 **Ruth**
Yeah, oh well UTSC and St. George, so.

00:43:52 **Mohammed**
They don't have a pass anymore?

00:43:54 **Ruth**
Not it's -

00:43:56 **Mohammed**
There's no student TTC pass anymore?

00:43:59 **Ruth**
No. There's the discount rate that you get as a student, but there is, when I was an undergrad at St. George for a year, there was an even discounted student passes you used to get.

00:44:10 **Mohammed**

Yeah and you used to pick it up from UTSU somewhere?

00:44:14 **Ruth**

Yeah. I don't think they sell them anymore

00:44:16 **Mohammed**

Wow.

00:44:18 **Ruth**

Yeah. And UTSC has been fighting for it for years.

Yeah. OK. So -

00:44:26 **Mohammed**

Maybe with the new property tax that the mayor wants he can fund it.

00:44:28 **Ruth**

Yes, that would be - So as, I guess, as part of your student union position or even as part of the organization, you were, you helped found, how were you guys engaging with the community? The Mississauga or the broader GTA?

00:44:52 **Mohammed**

What community?

00:44:54 **Ruth**

I guess the outside community, like UTM is obviously located in -

00:45:01 **Mohammed**

A bubble -

00:45:02 **Ruth**

Mississauga. Yeah well in a bubble, but tell me more about that bubble.

00:45:06 **Mohammed**

Yeah. No there was very little interaction with other levels of government at the time. I mean we had like debates and stuff for elections, but beyond that, there was nothing. The only time when there was an active engagement for people at UTM with Mississauga folks, was when we created the U-pass.

00:45:32 **Ruth**

OK. And what was that process like?

00:45:36 **Mohammed**

I can't remember the year it was created. I think it was created - so like my involvement with UTM was, you know - so I did that UTM position 2003-2004. And then I left and came back in 2007, as a staff person, as an Executive Director of ECSU [Erindale College Student

Union] at the time. Which that year merged with UTMSU - with UTSU. So ECSU and UTSU merged in to UTMSU and that was year one in 2007-2008. 2008-09 we attempted to merge EPUS like the part time students, but we definitely over-stretched and we had to pay legal fees for trying to - for that stupidity. Yeah, we lost that one. We won the referendum, but we lost the legal challenge, on our right to be able to run that referendum.

00:46:48 **Ruth**
OK.

00:46:50 **Mohammed**
Yeah, not the best judgment call.

00:46:53 **Ruth**
[Laughs] And outside of, I guess different levels of government, what about different community organizations? Obviously UTM exists in a -

00:47:04 **Mohammed**
CFS.

00:47:05 **Ruth**
CFS. OK.

00:47:06 **Mohammed**
Yeah, I mean all of our like trainings were CFS trainings. All of our going to conferences were CFS conferences. All our engagement with direct lobbying was because of CFS, who were like you know, taking us to Queen's Park and to talk to the officials. Yeah, so that's - it was mostly the CFS.

00:47:30 **Ruth**
And what about like local issues, like -

00:47:32 **Mohammed**
No, nothing.

00:47:33 **Ruth**
Nothing? OK.

00:47:35 **Mohammed**
No.

00:47:38 **Ruth**
Nothing at all. Like poverty, income inequality, like different -?

00:47:41 **Mohammed**
No. We talked about local issues for sure, but we didn't engage with different organizations outside.

00:47:49 **Ruth**

OK.

00:47:50 **Mohammed**

I think maybe we did like charitable drives for different things. Like for soup kitchens or different charities. But it wasn't like we were doing – and also a lot of the student clubs, do a lot of charitable stuff, so it didn't make sense for us to lead on that. It was better for them to lead on it and us for – for us to lean in on that. Stuff they were doing, like a charity run for, orphan run or something like that, then UTMSU would donate to, or you know, fund the club, but also maybe donate to that event. Our ethos was just how do we build student power. So, using different issues to get people involved in stuff. So, that could be international stuff, that could be Palestine, that could be, whatever it might be, we used to get people actively engaged on issues.

And that started from, right from the beginning. And then, yeah. The best way – what we used to do is, we used to – if we wanted to find out if someone can lead a committee, we would come up with a random petition, just come up with a random petition and say, "here, can you get these five sheets filled out?" and give them a clipboard and a pen. And if they were to have enough conversations with people, then we're like oh this person actually has the ability to talk to people, therefore let's put them higher on a scale of engagement. And then let's create some track for them to move up. The random petition model.

00:49:47 **Ruth**

OK. Yeah, that's a very effective way of gauging how to -

00:49:51 **Mohammed**

Who's in, who's out.

00:49:53 **Ruth**

Yeah. And I guess through that, were there – could you tell me about your experiences I guess, when you came back as a staff member? And how it might have been different supporting students, activism and yeah, the student union as a whole?

00:50:13 **Mohammed**

Yeah, that was a lot of fun, that was a lot of fun. We had just, like when I first came in, that's when the merger between UTSU and UTMSU, the creation of UTMSU happened, I believe. I think so, or just before there was a – the President at the time was a gentleman named Walied Khogali, who started towards right at the tail end of mine, getting involved in different things. And in the four years that I was away, working for Mothers Against Drunk Driving, or three and a half years. He bloomed into a massive leader on campus. And the moment when - all of the student unions basically went relatively progressive, the marker was his election.

So, he was able to work with everybody from a wide perspective, to kind of say, "OK here, how do we build a progressive agenda on campus?" And he definitely amalgamated all the voices to make into like a progressive long-term progressive, powerful voice.

00:51:59 **Ruth**

And what were some of the initiatives that the – other than creating the progressive agenda that were being formed?

00:52:05 **Mohammed**

Oh, there was lots. It was just like, well firstly, there was a lot of activism in general on campus. So, issues on this, issues on that, just constantly going on those. The mergers were big deals back then. The U-pass referendums were big deals. And somebody created the U-pass, or I think – I don't think the referendums was in his first year or I can't remember, to be honest. But I think it was around that time. Because I remember doing the first distribution, of U-passes. And some of the negotiating with that. But I can't remember if that negotiation was the renegotiation or the original negotiation.

Anyways, the U-pass, that was the universal pass, so it was just built into your tuition fees, significantly different than TTC. And that was the first year we implemented that and then, it was such a success that I think people were expecting it to cost like 90 bucks for the whole year, but I think the ridership went up so much that Mississauga Transit was like, "well, we can't afford to do it at this rate, so we've got to increase it further." And then had to go back and move that fee over to QSS. So, that the Administration could administrate it. Because they're like well, anything above adding inflation, had to go to referendum if it was a UTMSU fee. So, they took that, but we still did the distribution.

Reason why we did the distribution is because people had to sign in to get it and then they would go on our email list. So, we were able to communicate directly with everybody through the U-pass. And that was the benefit of having them – that was the benefit of the student union distributing it. But also, I think it created jobs on campus, because we were able to hire a bunch of people. And usually people who are involved or have potential to be involved in greater student life, from clubs or whatever, they would – or you know, or people who are struggling on campus too, would likely end up with those jobs too.

And then they've obviously got a like right on-campus job, then students are like, "what, I can work here too? This is awesome" and then they're always looking for other on-campus jobs too. And then that – yeah, we did a whole whack load of restructuring the year we merged. So, we created, I think it's like 15, 20 part-time jobs over a full year. And then it just started getting more and more people involved in things and they started running committees and just started – yeah, like the point of each – I think, I can't remember, if it's coordinator positions, was to use as incubation grounds for them to bring more

people onto committees, in order to discuss issues whatever, that's relevant to their portfolio, in order to bring more people into the union.

00:55:54 **Ruth**

And how do you think – I guess, your experience on campus and your student activism really shaped, I guess your career later on?

00:56:02 **Mohammed**

Yeah. I mean, I think from day one when we first started organizing in 2001, I realized, I liked bringing people together on issues. And, I went through many phases in my life where I was just like, "we're going to do it my way or the highway," to "let's figure out a new way and to let's figure out," – but like the desire to figure it out, in terms of social issues. And to use that desire to organize and bring more people in, that was completely born in the student movement.

00:56:52 **Ruth**

OK.

00:56:54 **Mohammed**

My title, my job right now is Senior Organizer.

00:56:57 **Ruth**

OK.

00:56:58 **Mohammed**

So, it's been a progression.

00:57:01 **Ruth**

Yes. That's full circle.

00:57:06 **Mohammed**

[Laughs] Yeah. Currently I work for the Toronto and York Region Labour Council. We represent most of the unions of Toronto. So, we represent unions who represent the unionized workers of Toronto. So, we're a bit of a collection of different unions and I do the organizing work for them.

00:57:34 **Ruth**

OK. And I guess I had a question about your academic experience. How did this also shape your academic experience?

00:57:39 **Mohammed**

I was terrible at academics. I barely paid attention to it. I barely, I squeaked through university. Yeah, it's a miracle I graduated. Yeah, there was not much room for me to go to post-grad because my marks were so terrible. But it wasn't because I wasn't smart or intelligent, it was because the academic setting just never really appealed to me. And that was from early on in school. I love reading, I just never found it to be – like my academics were never - I can't even remember what my degree is in, to be honest. It's a BA but I just

wanted to get it over with so I can get a piece of paper and tell my mom that I graduated. And that was why I ended up finishing it.

But yeah, because I came back part-time and did my academic. And that's why I - yeah, I just, I mean I know academics are important and I have taken courses since then. But I found the classroom settings at U of T to be too impersonal and distant. And any time I would try to engage with a prof, I realize that I had 12 minutes to get in and out. Because they had five more people in that hour to go see. And I'm not blaming it on them, it was definitely my fault that I didn't take enough energy on it. But there were some stand-outs. There was some profs who were like, "hey, I have an interest in what you have to say and let's remain in conversation." And those people have been instrumental in my life.

Yeah, there was a teacher when I was, I came back part-time, I can't remember what year it was. But she was teaching diaspora studies at UTM, her name was Rima Berns McGown. And I would come into her class when I was working at Mothers Against Drunk Driving and I was finishing my school part-time. And she really challenged me. She's like, "I appreciate what you have to write here, but I think you can do better and I think you need to go a bit deeper." And she was generous enough with her time and her energy to make me want to do better. And then after I finished school, she was part of this thing called the Couchiching Institute on Public Affairs.

So, she got me involved over there and then - and it's like this old white summer camp essentially, that every year people will go to. And they even have big name folks there. And a bunch of - a few random racialized folks, because they're - and she was honestly trying to diversify the Institute in order to create some space. And I think the first time I believed that I was part of a conversation around public policy that mattered, and that my voice mattered in the conversation, was when she included me in those conversations at the Couchiching Institute.

And I thought to myself, "wow, I do have an opinion and there's people of significance here who are listening to my opinion and "saying, that's an interesting opinion."" And I realised like oh, maybe I do have a right to be at this table. And yeah, so she was the person to help me realize that.

01:02:14 **Ruth**
OK. Her name sounds very familiar.

01:02:15 **Mohammed**
Yeah, I helped her get elected.

01:02:18 **Ruth**
OK.

- 01:02:18 **Mohammed**
So, she's now the MPP in Beaches - East York.
- 01:02:20 **Ruth**
Wow, OK.
- 01:02:22 **Mohammed**
Yeah.
- 01:02:23 **Ruth**
So, that works full circle.
- 01:02:25 **Mohammed**
Yeah. I was her Campaign Co-chair. So, yeah. And I mean we talk every day, we still talk every day. Now just the issues that we're dealing with are a bit more complex and much more alive in terms of public discourse. But yeah, my job is now I'm a political organizer, within the labour movement. So, I work with politicians on all three levels to help people either get elected or believe in themselves to run or to work on issues that are affecting people and constantly pushing and driving a progressive policy agenda.
- 01:03:21 **Ruth**
Yeah. I feel like this is amazing to hear that you've taken your experiences in your undergrad and made it something that's not only your life, but a career, that's something that you're passionate about.
- 01:03:37 **Mohammed**
Yeah, I'm super fortunate, super fortunate. There's not a lot of people that come – it seems these days a lot of people that I started off with in the student movement are – a lot of them are in the labour movement. A lot of them are working for politicians. Because there was a real – there was an honest grind back then, where I found that we really had to work hard to win either elections or referendums, or whatever that might be. And once we won, it was easy to remain in power. And I know that like when I was there, at UTMSU, for the four years after when I was the Executive Director, I didn't have the fire that I had back when I was a student. And I don't think on campus there was that level of anxiety or drive that used to be the case.
- And I think those all cyclical. They come up and down in terms of whatnot. And yeah, I think I was really fortunate to be in a time and place where I got lucky, and I was able to move a few things. And then realised wow, I can move a few more, and then a few more, and then a few more. And I think I was still trying to move a few more.
- 01:05:28 **Ruth**
Yes.
- 01:05:31 **Mohammed**
Yeah.

01:05:33 **Ruth**
That's how it goes, right.

01:05:35 **Mohammed**
Yeah.

01:05:37 **Ruth**
Is there anyone else that you think we should really speak to for this project? Because we're still looking for people and we'd love your recommendations.

01:05:49 **Mohammed**
What years?

01:05:51 **Ruth**
Any years that you feel are relevant, whether it be before you or after you, or even during your time.

01:06:01 **Mohammed**
For UTM specifically?

01:06:03 **Ruth**
St. George, UTSC -

01:06:09 **Mohammed**
I definitely think you should interview Walied Khogali.

01:06:17 **Ruth**
Yes.

01:06:18 **Mohammed**
He was the person who transformed UTM's politics the most. Yeah, only other people I know are from different campuses. The best thing about the CFS was that we met such a wide variety of people from different campuses that you become friends with these people. And the best man at my wedding was the VP University Affairs at the York Federation of Students when I was there. We went to Cuba to listen to Fidel Castro speak together. You know? [Laughs]. So, we – yeah, we've kind of travelled the world together since then.

01:07:16 **Ruth**
That's amazing.

01:07:17 **Mohammed**
Yeah and literally, I was, on Monday in Ottawa at the NDP Christmas party and this guy comes up from behind me and gives me a hug. And I turn around, and it's my friend George Soule who I met when he was the Food Bank Coordinator at the Carlton University Students' Association back in 2001, when I was at a rally in Ottawa and I had no place to sleep. And he was like, "hey why don't you sleep in the pub?"

Find a spot" and I was like, "Thanks man." And we've stayed in touch since then. So that's like the cross-pollination of the CFS world is really – it's an important – it was an important piece in my life, to be able to connect with others.

01:08:19 **Ruth**
Yeah.

01:08:20 **Mohammed**
And we've always been supportive of – people have always been supportive of each other from there on in. Yeah.

01:08:39 **Ruth**
Is there anything else you would like to add or anything that you want to touch on, that you might not have mentioned?

01:08:49 **Mohammed**
I think we're good.

01:08:51 **Ruth**
Thank you so much.

01:08:52 **Mohammed**
You're welcome. I hope that was helpful.

01:08:54 **Ruth**
Yes, that was very helpful. And it's great to hear about different campuses, like I think I always had an affinity for UTM because of its similarities to UTSC, so.