Charity: Debbie, thank you for being here.

Deborah: It’s a pleasure to be here.

Charity: What were some of the problems that you saw developing after September 11th that led to this project?

Deborah: Well I think that prior to September 11th on the law enforcement side, counterterrorism to some extent had not been a national priority for the FBI for example, and we didn’t have a Department of Homeland Security. One of the things that FBI agents are supposed to do is to develop domestic intelligence. And I think prior to September 11th they knew very little about the American Arab Muslim and Sikh communities here in this country. On the other side of the aisle, the American Muslim and Sikh communities had not traditionally been part of community policing strategies. They had very little interaction with law enforcement either at the state and local level, or at the federal level. And so you have two communities which really had operated independently of one another and in a framework that didn't in anyway create protocols for community policing.

Charity: Well then at the same time, law enforcement wanted two things from these communities. First of all they were suspicious of them for harboring possibly domestic terrorists, and at the same time they wanted there help in getting the intelligence to fight terrorism.

Deborah: That's true, and I think that's where this project began. After September 11th, Dr. (Ziad) Asali who at the time was the director of the national organization the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee really came forward to me because I had been doing community policing work with the Department of Justice prior to September 11th, and said, is there any common basis for partnerships? We talked about that and really came up with three. It is true that law enforcement needs something from these communities, they need domestic intelligence. They do not need spies, and I think that most of the people who have worked in counterterrorism for years say we're not thinking that this community is harboring terrorists, but we think that they have the cultural knowledge and the linguistic knowledge to best identify who within their community is engaging in suspicious behavior, and we need them to communicate that to us. So that was one common concern of law enforcement and one reason that law enforcement wants to partner with the community. On the other hand, the community was saying we, after September 11th, are besieged by hate crimes and hate incidents. We need law enforcement to stand with us and say that there will be zero tolerance for hate crimes and hate incidents against the Arab, Muslim, and Sikh community, and we need them to
aggressively prosecute these cases. So there again was part of a common bridge, and finally I think both law enforcement and the community realized that while we call this a war on terror, it's not a war that can be won with sheer military power. This is an ideological battle for the hearts and minds of the Islamic world outside of the United States, and there was a consensus within the community that they could best help this country create the kinds of messages that need to go to that community, and need to counter the hateful messages being propagated against the United States.

Charity: You studied three different sites in the United States, in southeastern Michigan, Southern California, and Boston, and of course here we're most interested in what's happening in southeast Michigan. What were some of the specific challenges you found facing this area?

Deborah: Well first, the reason that we chose Michigan as a site is because uniformly we heard from Arab Muslim and Sikh community leaders across the country that the gold standard in terms of community policing was in Dearborn, Michigan. And so we wanted to learn more about how that model worked, what worked, what didn't work, what promising practices there were, and what challenges existed. And you mentioned challenges, and I think that in Dearborn, Michigan, some of the challenges included very difficult federal law enforcement initiatives that were implemented just after September 11th about which the community had major concerns. For example, after September 11th the Department of Justice embarked on an initiative to interview people who were from fifteen countries who were residents here in the United States, and whose countries had been identified as places where there had been Al-Qaida activity. The community felt that some of these initiatives were a form of racial profiling. They felt that they were being singled out because of their religion and because of their country of origin, and they were upset about that. On the other hand, law enforcement said back to them, we're at a critical time in this country, we're not saying that the people on this list are targets of an investigation, but they may have information, even inadvertent information, that's important to investigations we're conducting. And so part of the challenge was, how do you work together when the community and law enforcement view these initiatives differently? And I think in Michigan what the decided to do was to try to implement them in a way which would mitigate damages to the community, which would educate the community about what was going on, and at the same time enable law enforcement to reach their operational objectives in terms of gathering intelligence and information.

Charity: Do you think they successfully did that?

Deborah: Very much so. Actually in Michigan, because you have one of the largest Arab populations in the country, you received a list from the FBI for interviews that was one of the largest lists in the country. Michigan, the FBI and local and state police, conducted approximately 330 interviews, only 12 people declined. So quantitatively, that was according to the GAO report, one of the highest response rates in the country to that initiative.
Charity: What made the way that they conducted these interviews in Michigan more successful than elsewhere?

Deborah: Well there are a number of things that Michigan did first. Instead of adopting an expertise model in which the FBI, the US Attorney’s office, Jeff Collins and John Bell from the FBI would say we’re going to do it this way, and here's how we're implementing it, they actually gathered the community together and decided together to create an implementation plan for conducting these interviews. Once they did that, they learned from the community that the community feared FBI and immigration coming to there doors unannounced at night, where their neighbors would see that this was occurring, or go into their work places unannounced. Having learned that, they decided instead to do something that was different from the way other jurisdictions conducted these interviews. They sent out letters to all of the people on the list. They emphasized that the interview was voluntary. They informed people that they were not themselves subjects or targets of an investigation. They allowed each individual to decide when and where the interview would take place. And the law enforcement told the community, both through the letter and in media interviews, that these interviews were being conducted and that they had decided to departner from immigration. They were not going to ask any questions about immigration status of the people being interviewed. All of that contributed to one of the highest response rates in the country.

Charity: The interviews were handled fairly well. There was a good relationship before September 11th between community law enforcement and the Arab American community. What were some of the things after September 11th that went wrong, that eroded those relationships?

Deborah: Well there were a number of things. First there were a number of hate crimes and it was challenging to respond to all of them. Second you had a very divisive incident in which a secret service agent, who was conducting a search warrant with a lot of officials on a Dearborn home, basically wrote on a prayer calendar at a home of someone, Islam is evil, Christ is king. And both law enforcement and community members were concerned about how this would be viewed, and what would happen. The community and law enforcement held several meetings about it. The community was educated about the process the secret service would have to discipline and punish this officer. And then publicly side by side they went to the media and said this incident was wrong, it did occur, it will not occur again, there is zero tolerance for such behavior from law enforcement or from anyone else, and that the secret service agent would be punished. And Imad Hamad, who is the executive director of Dearborn's Arab American Anti-Discrimination Committee, stood side by side with Jeff Collins, the US Attorney, and both of them agreed that they felt that law enforcement had appropriately handled this, and that the secret service agent had been appropriately punished.

-Break-
Charity: Debbie, before the break you mentioned Imad Hamad. And there was another incident involving him that really seemed to erode the trust of the Southeast Michigan Arab American community and this was very big news around here because he was a real leader in cooperating with the FBI after 9-11. He started Bridges, a series of meetings between the Arab American community and law enforcement representatives. And he's a very respected man in the community. He was nominated for the exceptional public service award from the FBI, and then shortly before he was to receive it, they decided that he couldn't.

Deborah: Yes, and I think this was a critical moment for the Bridges program in Dearborn. Imad Hamad is not just an honorable person and a leader within Dearborn, he is a nationally respected leader within the Arab Muslim and Sikh community nationwide. And so everyone was saddened to see the award rescinded. And at that point, Imad Hamad had to really decide how he was going to react. And there was an emergency meeting of Bridges in the early morning, federal law enforcement gave the community all the information that they had, and Imad Hamad said to the Bridges group, Washington is a very political place, and sometimes an award like this gets mixed up in that process. But we cannot allow whatever difference we have to be an excuse for disengagement. And Bridges took a vote on whether they were going to continue or whether they would disband to protest the FBI rescission of the award. And Imad Hamad spoke eloquently asking them not to disband in protest. But that the best way in which they could honor his work would be to continue with the Bridging initiative, and that's what happened.

Charity: So far we've talked about a couple of incidents where law enforcement, both on the local and on the federal level, got things wrong, did something to damage the relationship between law enforcement and the Arab American community. Is there anything that the Arab American community did that damaged that relationship?

Deborah: I think that at times the community has sometimes gone to the press and protested government initiatives when they didn't always know the full details about what was being done. And I think that can be very damaging to relationships with the government, I think that outside of Michigan we’ve seen in both L.A. and in Boston, some groups that are so alienated by what they perceive to be unfair initiatives by federal government or by state or local government, that they refuse to come to the table and even discuss with law enforcement what common areas they can work on together. And I think that is a mistake on the part of the community because federal law enforcement sometimes makes mistakes, but they're here for the duration. And the community needs to build bridges to the FBI and to state and local law enforcement.

Charity: When you compare these different communities, what was it about Southeast Michigan, what is it about Southeast Michigan that made them so much more successful at creating these partnerships?

Deborah: Well for one thing there was prior institutionalized communication between law enforcement and the Arab and Muslim community and the Sikh community as well,
prior to September 11th, which made it very much easier for law enforcement to continue a model of community policing and to continue institutionalized community policing. Unlike for example in Boston, where there in Boston we have a strong community policing model but it never included the Arab, Muslim, and Sikh community because they are a small community in Boston and quite dispersed. In Dearborn, in Michigan, in Detroit, you cannot do a community policing initiative and exclude the very large Arab and Muslim population that exists there. So you had an advantage in that the numbers of Arabs and Muslims in Dearborn were so large that they were already included in a preexisting community policing model.

Charity: From what you've learned from the communities that you've researched, what kind of recommendations are you making to law enforcement and to the communities?

Deborah: Well we're making a recommendation that first there be a commitment on the part of all of the 56 field offices of the FBI to try to implement this concept of partnering with the community and to try to work with them rather than against them. In addition we're asking them to identify their community partners and their state and local partners, and to begin to engage in a nationwide effort to develop training materials, tools, and protocols, to begin to implement this model nationally. Second we’re recommending that if possible they use academic partners or intermediaries to facilitate and break through whatever differences exist. And third, we’re saying to the communities that every community is different, maybe everything that's being done in Dearborn can't be replicated because another community may have different resources, different strengths, and different weaknesses. But rather than having each jurisdiction reinvent the wheel and possibly make the same mistakes, there needs to be a coordinated center in which people come together nationally, learn from one another and begin to create the kinds of templates, tools, and training that will be necessary to institutionalize this program nationwide.

Charity: Debbie, thank you.

Deborah: Thank you.