

In his own words: Abdullah al-Kidd

Q: If [FBI Director] Robert Mueller and John Ashcroft were sitting here, what would you say to them?

A: I'd like to tell them my side of the story. That's all. My main goal of this case is vindication, of my name, and I want the government to apologize and acknowledge their mistakes and right the wrongs so this won't happen to other people.

Q: Why did you convert to Islam?

A: Religion has always mattered in my life, always, but I was missing structure and kind of concerned about being a young man without any direction. I had changed my major in college three times--from psychology to anthropology and then PR, but really wasn't sure what I wanted to do. I was on my own for the first time away from my parents, and in a period of soul searching when I studied the teachings of Islam and certain things really appealed to me. I liked that my day would be structured around prayer and that I could have a direct connection to God without necessarily having an intermediary.

Q: What was your experience of being a Muslim in America?

A: Prior to 9-11, there was no stigma attached to being a Muslim and I felt comfortable living here. When I watched the terrorist attacks on television, I knew immediately that life would be very different for Muslims and for people in general, and almost right away, people began staring at me, I suppose because I had a beard. I felt a lot of pressure interacting with people because I could see the question mark in their eyes and tone of voice: who is this guy? I went out of my way to make people feel comfortable so I would be accepted.

Q: How would you describe your experiences with the FBI?

A: I met with FBI agents three times in 2002. The first time they interviewed me at my mother's house in Seattle where I was staying. They were direct but polite, and the majority of their questions centered on me; who do you know, have you been to this or that mosque, why did you travel to Saudi Arabia? They asked only a few questions about the al-Hussayen case. Then I figured the interviews were done because I heard nothing from them for six months.

Q: What did you think when FBI agents arrested you at Dulles International Airport?

A: I was totally surprised and humiliated. I was at the ticket counter, dressed in a long [religious] robe, and they handcuffed me and paraded me back through airport. I was really embarrassed because I could imagine what the people who saw me were thinking: ‘oh, there goes another one of those terrorist guys they just arrested on the plane.’ At the time, the agents weren’t clear why I was being arrested, but they told me if I talked to them I could probably continue my trip, so that’s why I talked to them. But I had a lot of emotions, frustration and fear, not knowing what the future held for me.

Q: Once it was explained to you that you’d been arrested as a material witness to secure your testimony at al-Hussayen’s trial, what was your treatment like?

A: I can’t imagine that a person who’s just a witness would be treated like I was. Through the whole ordeal, they treated me like a convicted criminal and I was singled out, because of what guards and others called ‘my situation.’ It made me feel like I was being singled out as a terrorist.

At the end of my detention in Alexandria [Virginia], U.S. Marshals drove me three hours to a tarmac with planes, cars and hundreds and hundreds of prisoners. It was such a surreal event because I saw all these convicted criminals, some obviously extremely dangerous because guards surrounded them at gunpoint.

They took off my chains and applied others as they escorted me, at gunpoint, onto a plane full of convicts headed for the Federal Transfer Center in Oklahoma City. There I was, with all these convicts, and I didn’t belong. I heard bits and pieces of conversations, like this person got 20 years for rape, this person’s doing life for murder. When convicts asked to use the restroom, marshals escorted them, but when I asked to go, the marshal told me he couldn’t unlock my restraints because of ‘my situation.’

Q: Did you ever speak up about your treatment? After all, as you said, you were just a witness.

A: A few times I did, like in Oklahoma, when I was singled out and left sitting naked in a stall, with no curtain, for three or four hours. I asked the guard when I would get my prison clothes, but he had no answer. When I was transferred to Boise, and met with FBI agents again, I was really scared because it seemed like their focus was on me now. They were trying to push me in a

direction and get me to change my story. At one point, the federal prosecutor pulled his chair close to me and threw down a stack of papers on the table. Mr. al-Kidd, he said, I know everything you said in these documents isn't true.

And I said: if what's in there isn't true, it's not because I told a lie, it's because you guys made mistakes.

Q: How has this experience changed you?

A: It's changed me tremendously because I had to pick myself up from a very low point. This crushed me. It was like a big snowball that kept getting bigger and bigger. This case is not as simple as my being labeled a material witness. I've had relationships and friendships end because of this case and I call what happened to me a social assassination.

I had a very painful situation with a really good friend of mine who I played football with and looked up to like a mentor. He stuck by me the whole time and told me: 'I don't know any person on earth besides you who could have survived this.' Then people warned him to leave me alone, 'or they [federal agents] will start watching you, too.' So he did pull away and that really hurt me.

After I was released, I was ordered to live with my in-laws, in Nevada, and once a month someone came to their home to make sure I was living there. I had no passport and had to check in with pretrial probation officer once a month. I felt so much pressure. I had a newborn child and was trying to provide for my family, but I couldn't find work and the marriage started going down the drain. [The couple eventually divorced.]

Q: What are your plans now? On March 2, will you be in Washington, to sit in on the Supreme Court arguments in your case?

A: No, I won't be staying that long. I'll be on my way back to Saudi Arabia then. I have a good job there, teaching English at a university, and I don't want to be away for long. While I don't feel like Saudi Arabia is my home now, my financial situation there is good, but one day I definitely want to live in the U.S. again.