

CENTER FOR DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION

WE

ARE

OHSU



CELEBRATING
ARAB AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH

Arab American Heritage Month (NAAHM) is celebrated during the month of April every year. NAAHM is a way to recognize the achievements of Arab Americans across the country. The Arab America Foundation launched Arab American Month initiative in 2017. In 2021, a letter from Potus to Arab America Foundation was sent, recognizing National Arab American Heritage Month.

WE ARE OHSU

OHSU is a diverse campus with members with different identities. Diversity is one of our core values, and we strive to create an environment of respect and inclusion. We acknowledge that diversity is not always seen, and we want to be intentional. The Center for Diversity and Inclusion started an initiative to highlight OHSU members in an interview series named We Are OHSU. This will go on all year long, where we can uplift and celebrate members of all communities, highlighting their impact on campus and their daily lives and showing everyone the wonderful communities we belong to.

WE ARE OHSU RANA NAJJAR

Rana is an associate professor in the School of Nursing. She has been with OHSU since September 2011 where she started as an assistant professor shortly after completing her Ph.D. at UCLA. In her role, Rana primary teaches, conducts research, serves on committees, and works towards infusing trauma-informed pedagogy at OHSU.

What do you enjoy about your work at OHSU?

I love our students. They are awesome, and I feel like we have such a unique group. They always inspire me with their journeys, stories, perseverance, and resilience. I am awed by them and what they can accomplish, especially in the last few years, and they taught me a thing or two about flexibility.

I represent the MENA (Middle East/North African) ERG and the School of Nursing on the oversight committee. I believe in that work and the idea of subverting oppressive systems and structures. My work on the oversight committee is about changing those systems and structures. Although this work is still nascent, I believe in it. OHSU is putting resources towards ensuring a safe healthcare, education, and research environment, and I get to contribute to the important DEI work using trauma-informed approaches in our community.



Where did you grow up and if you live and work somewhere different now, what drew you there?

I have lived in many different places. I was born in Lebanon and lived between Lebanon and Nigeria for the first ten years of my life. My family and I immigrated to Houston when I was ten years old, which is where I grew up. Houston is diverse in many ways, so I assumed it was the same throughout the United States. I moved to Oregon after getting married and it was so different than what I was used to. The Pacific Northwest was so foreign to me that the only reference I had was the television show Frasier! I originally did not like it when I would visit because it seemed dreary and rainy all the time. But, after getting married and moving to Portland, I got to know the beauty of Oregon. The weather does not bother me anymore. I appreciate the four seasons and having a garden, something I did not have growing up and living in Houston. It reminds me of Lebanon in some ways. My grandmother had an orchard and gardens and used to grow fruits and vegetables. My mom grew up in a mountain village, so being able to have a garden and teach my daughter about the importance of the environment, of nature, and all living things, all connect me back to that.

What has most surprised you about your past and about the path of your career?

I have wanted to be a nurse since I was sixteen. My first exposure to healthcare was after my mom was injured during the civil war in Lebanon. I have always known that I would go into health care, but a career in education was very much a surprise. Being a nurse educator was not in my plans, and the idea of achieving a Ph.D. was not even in the realm of possibility for me. We do not have anybody in our close or extended family that has a Ph.D., and I did not even know what that path looked like. I was fortunate that my husband wanted to pursue his doctorate, and the opportunity for my doctoral studies presented itself while I was working at UCLA Medical Center in Los Angeles. I had the support of my family, especially my mom, who quelled my fears and doubts and said, “just go for it, you can do anything, and we are behind you!”

Could you tell me more about your heritage?

Our ancestors come from the mountains of Lebanon and Syria. Although I never lived in the mountains, I always feel grounded and spiritually connected to mountain environments. We speak Arabic and my faith is Tawhid Druze.

I always say I have grown up on a hyphen, between being Arab and American. My Arab heritage and some of the cultural norms are a part of me and ground me. Our heritage and culture are how we engage in the world, know ourselves, and know others. This is a difficult task for many of us, but especially challenging when we straddle two cultures and two ways of knowing and doing. It was hard for me to be able to figure out where I belonged. Going back to Lebanon, I did not feel fully Arab, and living here in the United States, I resisted assimilation in many ways (also my family did not allow it). This caused me a lot of angst and I grappled with this as a teenager and young adult trying to find a place of belonging. Living on that hyphen between Arab and American is something I think about in whatever space I go into, and that never leaves me. My lived experience is not unique, and I think anyone who has lived between two or more cultures regardless of race or ethnicity may connect to this lived experience. Being around others with a similar lived experience or journey feels grounding. Now I see that living on that hyphen, having both identities, is a privilege that has provided me the opportunity to really think about who I am and where I come from. I recognize now that I do not have to sacrifice one for the other. In this season of my life, I chose to live on that

hyphen and embrace this state of in betweenness fully. With diversity being accepted and embraced sometimes, makes it easier to settle into that hyphen and think “Yep, I’m here and it feels good right now.”

What is your proudest achievement to this date?

My daughter is the most important thing to me. This is one of the proudest moments of my life, being with her and being able to share her with my husband and the rest of our family. Getting my master’s in nursing and my pediatric nurse practitioner certification was also a proud achievement for me because it was never expected of me. My parents had always talked about us going to college, even though they did not. Neither my grandparents nor my parents went to college, so graduating with a degree was big, and when I achieved my master’s, it was even bigger. My husband and I graduated with our Ph.D.s.’ at the same time. When we graduated, he said his Ph.D. was his gift to his mother, and I feel the same—my PhD is my gift to my mom. They earned it as much as we did. I also feel that they are our gift to the future generation of immigrants, children of immigrants, and all those who have to live on the hyphen.

What is one piece of advice you would give your Arab American students and

employees?

Anybody who lives the on the hyphen, as an immigrant or anyone living between two cultures, especially if your culture is very different from Western culture, knows that you add to the rich tapestry of the United States. Find where you belong on that hyphen no matter where it is and hold that space for yourself. This is not easy, as I have found myself. I have internalized many of those systems of oppression, and it has become part of my epistemological knowing. I have this internal dialogue that says, “I have to behave this way,” “I have to do it this way” or “This is always the way it’s been done in this space.” It is only when we embrace our authentic selves that we realize those spaces of discomfort. That is our cue to examine whether the discomfort stems from an environment that is asking us to suppress our authentic selves.

What is one thing people in our industry can do to be more supportive of efforts to increase representation of Arab Americans and healthcare?

I would love it if people knew about Arabs beyond what they see in the movies and on the news. Arabs come from twenty-two different nations in the Middle East and across North Africa. There is a diversity in culture, dialects, religions, and foods. Arabs have contributed to

history, philosophy, religion, and science. Arabs invented soap, coffee, toothbrushes, alphabet, and contributed to mathematics, astronomy, and language arts. In the United States, tens of thousands have served in the armed forces, and contributed to the business, science, and medical research. I think of Danny Thomas who established St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital; Dr. Michael DeBakey, inventor of the heart pump; Dr. Farouk El-Baz who helped plan all the Apollo moon landings and pioneered the use of space photography to study Earth; and Dr. Edward W. Said, who revolutionized critical theory. They were all Arabs. Yet, in the United States, we continue to be an invisible group. Being an ethnically invisible group in the United States has a negative impact, especially in healthcare. If you consider access, language barriers, health research, and all that require funding which we do not have access to. When I first started considering areas of research, I was told to avoid studying Arab or Middle Eastern Americans because there was no funding in studying those groups. So that has stayed with me and emboldens me in the quest for fair representation. We should work on changing things for the next generation of MENA researchers and healthcare providers. These are the issues that hurt our community, but also deny us all in the US achieving health equity. If we want to

live up to the ideals of this nation, we must continue to strive towards changing oppressive systems that exclude, other, or render us invisible. One thing to add is that I am grateful we get to celebrate National Arab American Heritage Month in April, but what about our brethren non-Arabs from the Middle East? We should raise awareness and advocate for the representation and recognition of all invisible groups in the United States

How do you celebrate you?

One of the few things that I have done just for me is sprint triathlons in the summer. This is one of the reasons why I love living in Oregon and being a place where I can do this. Of course, first I had first work through the idea of swimming in a cold lake at 8:00 a.m. in the summer!

I cannot celebrate myself without my family and my community. Since COVID-19 has improved, my community (a group of Middle Easterners who found each other in Eugene) recently gathered together for the first time. We had a party with lots of singing, dancing, and food. We can all be in the same space again, thankfully, and that space is usually loud, noisy, and very boisterous. That refuels and sustains me. Being with my family and friends, yes, that is how I celebrate me.

