

LAURA FLANDERS & FRIENDS

MAYSOON ZAYID: COMEDY OF RESISTANCE, DISABILITY, DIFFERENCE & PALESTINE

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LAURA FLANDERS: If you're like me, you have spent a good amount of the last year doom scrolling images from hell. Israel's US-backed war on Gaza, the West Bank, now Lebanon, and all places it seems where there might be Palestinians has filled our social media feeds with the worst images imaginable. Dead babies, starving adults, journalists assassinated in the very act of reporting. Ancient places flattened and burned. Amidst all the horror, one person's social media feed has popped up and made me smile. She calls Palestine her happy place, her home village, the most beautiful place on Earth. And her posts from there have reflected that in all their love and bitter humor and heartbreak this year. Here's one.

- (MAYSOON ZAYID) We are back in Dheisheh Refugee Camp. You loved the video last time. I'm going to give you more. People ask me all the time, "Why are you going to Palestine right now?" I'm here right now because this is my happy place. That's right. Palestine is my happy place. Even with every single oppressive, violent thing that's happening, this is still the best place on Earth.

LAURA FLANDERS: Maysoon Zayid is an actor and comedian, Princeton fellow, disability activist. She lives with cerebral palsy, she's Palestinian, the co-founder of the Arab American Comedy Festival, and the author of a recently released graphic novel, "Shiny Misfits," for which the musician Dave Matthews recorded the audio book. She has "become an expert," as she puts it, in "making funny during a genocide." She's also paid a price. To tell us more about all of it. I am happy to welcome Maysoon Zayid to "Laura Flanders & Friends." Maysoon, I am so happy to have you here.

MAYSOON ZAYID: I love being invited. Nobody invites me to anything these days, so this is a real treat for me.

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, to give people a little sense of your history, here's a clip of Maysoon's 2014 [TED Talk](#).

- (MAYSOON ZAYID) And I don't want anyone in this room to feel bad for me because at some point in your life you have dreamt of being disabled. Come on a journey with me. It's Christmas Eve, you're at the mall, you're driving around in circles looking for parking, and what do you see? 16 empty handicap spaces. And you're like, "God, can I

just be a little disabled?" Also, I gotta tell you, I got 99 problems and palsy is just one. If there was an Oppression Olympics, I would win the gold medal. I'm Palestinian, Muslim, I'm female, I'm disabled, and I live in New Jersey.

LAURA FLANDERS: That was Maysoon's TED Talk from 2014, which, as I understand it, I think was the most watched TED Talk of that year. So as you say there, Maysoon, you grew up in New Jersey. How did you grow your love for Palestine, as you did?

MAYSOON ZAYID: So, I was born and raised in New Jersey, but I spent every single summer in Palestine. So I do a joke on stage where I say, "My friends would go to a Jersey Shore and I would go live in a war." And so every single summer we went and lived back home with my grandmothers, with my aunts, with my cousins. We farmed land, we washed our own clothes, we didn't have internet, we didn't have TV. And that's where that love came from, because I got to live two completely separate existences. And as a disabled kid, I just liked Palestine a lot more than Jersey.

LAURA FLANDERS: Why? How come?

MAYSOON ZAYID: Well, first of all, I wasn't the only disabled kid. Like it was very isolating in New Jersey because my parents fought to have me mainstreamed before the Americans with Disabilities Act was ever even passed. And so I was the only visibly disabled kid in my school growing up. But in Palestine there were other disabled kids and disability wasn't shunned. It wasn't mocked. It wasn't bullied. I grew up in a society that very much believed that disability was a natural part of life, and that all things from God was good. And you know, kind of a centerpiece of how I raised was that I wasn't a mistake. That this was all by design. You know?

LAURA FLANDERS: Your parents sound like pretty incredible people, and you have followed in that tradition, sending that message to people who might feel that they are outliers, with your new book, "Shiny Misfits." Which I should say was recently announced as a Read Across America book.

MAYSOON ZAYID: Read Across America is a huge, amazing thing because it's the National Educators of America and they choose 12 books a year from each category. And the reason I think it's so important that it was chosen for Read Across America is because "Shiny Misfits" is not your conventional middle grade book. First of all, it's a comic book. And secondly, your center character is a Muslim disabled kid.

LAURA FLANDERS: And how'd you get Dave Matthews to do the audio book?

MAYSOON ZAYID: I was a huge Dave Matthews Band fan, and then I had the privilege of doing a movie with Dave Matthews. He is even cooler than he seems on stage. He's even funnier, he's even realer, and he's extraordinarily intelligent, empathetic, and a real cheerleader. I wrote the cat rhyming because I knew that I wanted Dave Matthews to voice it.

LAURA FLANDERS: To get a sense of Dave Matthews playing the cat, here's a bit of that audio book from "Shiny Misfits."

- (Bay Ann) Maria says I have the handwriting of a serial killer.

- (Lucy) Someday I shall meet this Maria, and I'll put an end to her verbal diarrhea.

- (Bay Ann) Why can't I just type? Nobody writes in cursive anymore.

- (Narrator) The pencil point snaps.

- (Lucy) Your mother hand writes every thank you note. She is quite literally the cursive goat.

LAURA FLANDERS: It's a great book and it's being described as about fame, friendship, not fitting in. It's friendly for neurodivergent audiences.

MAYSOON ZAYID: The cover is tactile so that people with autism or neurodivergent, can kind of use it as a stim while they're reading it. The font was designed by my incredible illustrator, Shadia Amin, to be dyslexic friendly, because we didn't find any font that was dyslexic friendly, so she drew a font. We made sure that Bay Ann wasn't by herself so that she wasn't the only disabled person in the book. There's an amputee, there's a wheelchair user, there's diabetics. And the best part of making it accessible was the audio descriptions. So when we were describing the skin tones of the different characters, it was a challenge. It was like how do you describe the skin tone if you're not like Latino or Filipino or Arab? And so we got advice from the First Nations and we used elements. In the audio book, everybody's skin tone is an element. So you're like baked clay, or opal, or rose gold. And it was like one of the proudest moments of my life to like unlock how we do that.

LAURA FLANDERS: That is so great. For those who don't know much about cerebral palsy, you have a quip in your TED Talk I remember about "You're not drunk but your doctor is." Just remind folks why some people are affected by cerebral palsy.

MAYSOON ZAYID: Cerebral palsy is basically a traumatic brain injury that happens within the birthing process, or shortly after birth, or shortly before birth. You could have a stroke in utero,

or in my case I was deprived of oxygen. And it damages the part of your brain that controls coordination, and it's literally different in everyone. So depending on the damage, it's like some of us are nonverbal, some of us are more like facing difficulties walking, others have more difficulty with their hands, and there's wheelchair users, and there's a whole spectrum of people with cerebral palsy. Mine, I joke on stage, it's very much inspired by Taylor Swift. So I shake it, I shake it, I shake it, I shake it like Taylor Swift. So I'm spastic. And I'm also an ambulatory wheelchair user, which means yes, I can tap dance in heels on Broadway, but also sometimes I use a wheelchair. And it's not because I'm lazy or because I'm faking, but because it's like a wave of ability.

LAURA FLANDERS: To jump back to Palestine for a minute, you have referred to war and genocide as a disabling event. Why?

MAYSOON ZAYID: It's a mass disabling event. On a daily basis we're hearing about the largest cohort of amputated children in modern history. When you've watched what we've watched, and when you survived what we've survived, and what we continue to try and survive with all odds against us has to do a job on your mental health. Hearing loss is extraordinarily affected in Palestine because of all the drones and the Apaches and the explosions and stuff. So this is a mass disabling event. And the way that I try to look at it positively is like I've been a disability advocate my entire career. I've always used comedy to humanize and educate on disability, and this is the moment because the future of Palestine is disabled and between life and death there's disability. I don't think it's better to be [dead than to be disabled](#). And I want us to create a viable, accessible future for this cohort of human beings that we have failed in the present.

LAURA FLANDERS: Disabling has many aspects to it, and I know from my own family that one of the aspects is this kind of pitying that happens. "Oh, you poor people. Oh you poor thing. What can we do for you?" I'm always torn as a reporter. We don't want to underplay what is happening. But at the same time, in so doing, we're sometimes making invisible the power of Palestinians, the beauty of the place, the history, the culture. And it's that mix that you brought so incredibly, brilliantly to your Instagram feed this year, for which I have so appreciated you. How do you balance those two things? Pain, and also incredible power and history.

MAYSOON ZAYID: I founded something called the [New York Arab American Comedy Festival](#) with my partner [Dean Obeidallah](#), my comedy partner, to combat the negative images of Arabs and Muslims in media, post 9/11. And I've spent my entire career, not just this year, but for years, showing the beauty, the humanity, the comedy, the art, the food, the love, the romance, the sunsets, the Christmas, of Palestine. And it felt like this year that it was all for naught. When I would see other Palestinian artists, like artists I had known for 20 years, for the first time after the genocide began, we would cry because we felt like we had failed. And so my goal is no longer to show the humanity, my goal is now to document our lives because existence is

resistance. We are a fun people, we are an alive people, we love life. And what we've been portrayed throughout history is these, you know, these uncivilized barbarians that hate people more than we love our children. So I thought to myself like, I just want people to see the Palestine I hang out in. I want people to see what I see. I want people to understand that these people are not separate. There's no two states. They live on top of each other. We are the labor, we are the working class. We're the ones who unfortunately build the settlements. We clean the houses, we work in the cafeterias, we pick the lettuce. It's just like the migrant class in this country. Tell them. What's happening? What's the news? Talk. You want freedom? And there's no freedom in this land? Say inshallah.

LAURA FLANDERS: Lots of people have loved your feed with all of its humor and heart, but others have not. Including the social media platforms that have posted some of this content. What's happened?

MAYSOON ZAYID: Everything I post gets reported and I've been completely stripped of my ability to monetize. But it's interesting because I get reported and it's because I know that people want to silence me. But that was not as disturbing as the amount of hate and bullying and violence I got throughout the election from people who were my former colleagues and friends, people who I shared stages and panels with. I was a delegate for Barack Obama in 2008. I was a Muslim surrogate for Hillary Clinton. I was a surrogate for Biden on disability and on women's stuff, and Muslim American stuff, which I now count as my most shameful activity or moment in my life. Being associated with Joe Biden is something I will never live down. And I can't even confront myself, but the way we were bullied online during this election because I wouldn't fall in line and endorse candidates that endorse genocide. And it was really shocking, because I always knew half the country wanted me dead. But when I knew it was 99%, I thought, "Hey, I need to write a sequel to "Shiny Misfits", because we're just not treating different people right in this country."

LAURA FLANDERS: Well, I hope you do write a sequel, for sure. And I hope that you let people know about your shows that you've taken to the stage. Those too have faced some challenges. You'll be coming to Joe's Pub in 2025.

MAYSOON ZAYID: [DisCo's a brand new show](#) that was supposed to be a television show and it was killed, and it was not greenlit, and now I'm taking it live to the stage. I'm going to tell you all about DisCo. But as a standup comedian, I have sold out comedy clubs in New York City for 20 years, and those clubs canceled me. I had corporate gigs canceled, I had academic invitations rescinded. I no longer have anyone paying for my health insurance, which is bankrupting me. I had over \$181,000 of work canceled. Not only are we being denied opportunities to perform, we're also having our livelihood decimated. But now I'm looking into possibly putting my cat Beyonce on OnlyFans. We'll see. But DisCo is my dream. My dream in life was to be a host on

"The View," but they never gave me a seat, ever. And so DisCo is "The View" after a really bad accident. It's a panel show hosted by a diverse cadre of disabled women, different types of disabilities. Some of us were born this way, some of us were blessed to join the DisCo. And the reason I call the show DisCo, is it stands for Disability Community, DisCo, because we're the party. Disability intersects with every single minority community. You can join us at any time, regardless of race, religion, age, gender, class, or who you love. And that's why I am who I am because my community has always been diverse.

LAURA FLANDERS: That's also a film just out that you're in, "The Ride Ahead?"

MAYSOON ZAYID: ["The Ride Ahead," with Samuel Habib](#). Samuel Habib is an amazing nonverbal wheelchair user who made a movie called "The Ride Ahead," about transitioning from being a cute disabled kid to an invisible, often neglected adult. And how we kind of fall off a love cliff when we turn into adults and services disappear, and parents age out of being able to take care of us. So Samuel was also talking about like, how do you become a disabled person who's dating and not being exploited? You know, unfortunately disabled women, for example, are three times more likely to be assaulted in their lifetime than their non-disabled peers, which is not something that people think about. It was so fun doing it because he's like a totally different generation than me and he's like all talking about like sex and dating, and blah blah blah, and I'm like a conservative Muslim. It was a really fun sit down. It shows a lot of Samuel's everyday life, and what it means to be disabled in America. And I can't tell you just how terrifying it is being disabled in America right now, because people like Samuel depend on home-based healthcare and people like me depend on \$12,900 prescriptions a month that are covered by our insurance to keep us alive and we don't know what's going to happen. Disability intersects with every single aspect of life. Anything that harms anyone, harms us even more. Whether it's climate change, and not being able to evacuate us in time, or as I said, violence against women, which disproportionately affects disabled women. Even one statistic that I will leave you with because I'm a comedian, so why not end on the darkest note possible? 50% of all Americans killed by law enforcement are disabled. That's the type of violence that we're facing, that's the type of fears that we're facing. But again, you give me a platform and I hope that I give hope to everyone to say there's more of us than them. We're the largest minority in the world. We have the buying power of China, \$8 trillion. So let's just, you know, band together, and make sure that we make the future accessible because the future is disabled.

LAURA FLANDERS: [And peace in Palestine](#). As I understand it, that one point you said that you were supporting some people-

MAYSOON ZAYID: I don't even want peace in Palestine. I want an end to the slaughter in Palestine. I don't want another child killed or disabled regardless of faith. That's it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Maybe justice comes closer, but that's for a whole nother episode.

MAYSOON ZAYID: I don't even want justice. I literally want the killing to end. So if it means killing ends and no one is held accountable, like we've seen for decades and centuries in history, I'm fine with that. I just need the killing to end. And then, if justice is possible, that's a goal for other people. But for me, it's life.

LAURA FLANDERS: Fair enough, Maysoon. You know, we ask all of our guests the same question at the end.

MAYSOON ZAYID: Miss Piggy is the best Muppet. I already know the answer.

LAURA FLANDERS: The question is, what's the story the future will tell of now? What do you think?

MAYSOON ZAYID: We failed. It's one sentence. We failed.

LAURA FLANDERS: All right. Then, because I, like you, can't bear to leave our audience on a totally down note. Can you tell us about being with Muhammad Ali?

MAYSOON ZAYID: Yes. I was a really young standup comic who didn't realize how young I was. I was only like three years into my career, and I had the opportunity to perform for Muhammad Ali. And it was very special because my father was a devout Muslim who never had seen me perform live because he was never going to go into any place that served alcohol. And he was able to attend this gala event in Washington D.C. for Muhammad Ali. And the two things I'll remember, is one, that I ended my routine by saying, "I get to perform for a man who floats like a butterfly, stings like a bee, has Parkinson's, and shakes just like me, Muhammad Ali." And then I remember him telling my dad I was funny. And that was like such a moment because he had been such an icon to young Muslim men in America when my dad had first come to America in 1959, as a 20-something year old with big dreams, watching this man. And now, all these decades later, Muhammad Ali refused to participate in the killing fields in Vietnam. He felt it was unjust and he spoke so loudly against it. And [other than Dave Matthews](#), how many artists have vocally, full throatedly come out and said, "No, I will not sign on to saying it's okay to kill certain people because they were born on the wrong land, the wrong faith."

LAURA FLANDERS: Maysoon Zayid, thank you so much for everything that you do, and for being with me on [Instagram](#) this year, and for your upcoming shows, which I'll be sure to make.

MAYSOON ZAYID: Every single one of us is a misfit. Even the most popular person has a part of them that doesn't fit in. So I hope you can find joy from "Shiny Misfits." I hope you can find

hope from what I put online for Palestine, and I hope that you can find courage to speak up. Your voice is your weapon against injustice. I beg you all, use it.

LAURA FLANDERS: Maysoon. Thank you so much.

MAYSOON ZAYID: Thank you.

LAURA FLANDERS: There's always more in these conversations than will fit into the broadcast. And that's true again this week. In our extended conversation Maysoon Zayid talks about human shields. Not the sort the Israelis refer to as they try to excuse their killing of tens of thousands of civilians in Gaza and the West Bank this year, or the kind the British used when they controlled Palestine in the 1930s, and they strapped civilian bodies to the tops of their military vehicles to try to prevent them coming under attack. It was a tactic they had used in Ireland in that country's war for independence. Just a note. No, not that kind. Maysoon, is talking about the shielding she saw people do of one another when they threw their bodies on their children, for example, to protect them from bombing in their homes, in their streets, and in their tents in refugee camps. Thinking about the bombs, so many of them coming from the US, I think about here and us in the months and years ahead. Will we throw our bodies on the most vulnerable? Migrants and teachers and librarians and abortion providers as they come under attack, deportation, mass layoffs, arrest? Will we shield one another, especially we white Americans who bear more responsibility than anyone for the results of the last election? Will we shield each other, and those who are different from us? I'm left with that question and I'll leave it with you. In the meantime, don't forget, you can get my full uncut conversation with Maysoon Zayid through a subscription to our free podcast, and watch this show streaming anytime through the links at our website. Till the next time, stay kind, stay curious. For "Laura Flanders & Friends," I'm Laura, thanks for joining us.

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