

This Being Human
Episode 3 Transcript – Ginella Massa

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

My name is Abdul-Rehman Malik, and I'm canvassing the world for the most interesting people, to hear about their journeys, their work, and what it means to be alive in the world today. And perhaps nobody has captured that experience, of being alive, better than the 13th-century Persian poet and Sufi mystic Jalaluddin Rumi in his poem, "The Guest House."

FEMALE VOICE:

This being human is a guest house. Every morning a new arrival. A joy, a depression, a meanness. Some momentary awareness comes as an unexpected visitor. Welcome and entertain them all.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

So welcome to *This Being Human*. A podcast inspired by Rumi's words and motivated by all those who carry that message forward in the world today. Today, journalist Ginella Massa.

GINELLA MASSA:

This being human means to me that everyone has a story and we should hear it — whether it is something that is going to lift us up and make us feel happiness and gratitude and delight, or whether it's going to be, you know, a crowd of sorrows.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Ginella Massa made history by simply showing up and doing her job. In 2016, while working for CityNews, she became the first person to anchor a major Canadian newscast wearing a hijab. It was a momentous occasion that brought her international media coverage. She was even recognized in Canada's House of Commons, by Member of Parliament Ruby Sahota.

RUBY SAHOTA CLIP:

Mr. Speaker, Ginella is a shining example of how amazing our country is and how everyone here has the opportunity to succeed in any field they desire.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

Ginella Massa has since moved on to be the face of *Canada Tonight*, a national show which began in January on CBC, once again making history as the first national hijabi anchor in the country. I spoke to Ginella shortly before the show launched.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ginella, welcome to *This Being Human*.

GINELLA MASSA:

Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

I'm excited to have you here. And I'm also excited to take us back in time to November 2016, which was an incredibly special time for you. Ginella, tell us what happened.

GINELLA MASSA:

Yeah, you know, it's kind of funny because in the moment, it was sort of a very mundane thing. I'd been, you know, working for this station for almost a year. And I'd been there reporting before that at another station. And they just asked me to fill in just before Christmas. The anchor wanted to take his kid to a hockey game. So he wanted a night off and they said, "Hey, can you fill in? You know, you've led the newscast before. You've done lots of important stories. We think that you're up for it. So, you know, would you mind filling in on the eleven o'clock?" And so I did, which is really exciting. And when the show was done, our late assignment editor, who was just starting his shift at, like midnight — he's the overnight assignment — he said, you know, "Is that at first? A woman in hijab, you know, anchoring?" And I said, "Yeah, I think it is." And so I snapped a picture and I tweeted it. And my phone would not stop buzzing the next day and the days after and the weeks after.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

So you actually in the moment didn't realize that you were making history.

GINELLA MASSA:

I mean, I did, but I kind of didn't want to make a big deal about it in my head because I didn't want to, you know, psych myself out. It was an exciting career milestone to be able to say, "Hey, I'm anchoring the 11:00." So I was just trying to treat it like just another day, you know, don't overthink it. Just do your job, you know what you're doing, you know? And so I kind of put it out of my head until after the show. So I kind of did know, but I didn't really expect the sort of international reaction that was going to come from it. I had a friend who was like, "My parents read about you in the Polish newspaper." Or like, "My dad sent me an article from *Times of India*." So it was that kind of reaction that I was not expecting. You know, I figured, "OK, locally in Canada, maybe in North America, you know, might make a couple of ripples," but I didn't expect that kind of reaction. And then I was actually in *The New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, and that was insane for me.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

When were you first called to journalism, into this into this heady space?

GINELLA MASSA:

Well, I was in the third grade. Let me take you back a long, long time ago. I was that kid in school who would not stop talking. So I would get the comments on my report card: "Ginella is a very good student, but she talks too much when she's not supposed to." So that would always get me in trouble. But I got away with it because I was still very much an A student and I was just very precocious and, you know, inquisitive and had lots to say and lots of questions. So I put all that good talking to use by entering this school speech competition in the third grade. And that was really kind of the first time where I thought, "Wow, I have something to say, and people

are listening. And I can say it in an interesting way and captivate an audience.” And I won that speech competition. And my mom was the one who kind of encouraged me and said, “Hey, you know, maybe you want to consider a career in broadcasting and in broadcast TV?” And at first I thought, “Well, maybe I'll go into radio because then it doesn't matter what I look like.” Because I'd never seen anyone who looked like me on television news. So that was kind of already limiting to me, feeling like that wasn't something that I could strive for because they weren't going to put someone like me on TV. But my mom was the one who was like, “Well, no, like, if you want to be on TV, that's what you should go for. Don't change your dreams for other people. And just because it hasn't been done before, doesn't mean that you shouldn't do it.”

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

From those early experiences, was there ever an aspiration to do what you're doing now, to be a national anchor?

GINELLA MASSA:

Honestly, being a national anchor for CBC is beyond my wildest dreams in terms of, you know, when I was entering this field and thinking about, you know, “What's my goal, what's my dream job?”. I don't think I even allowed myself to aspire to something that big. It was like, “If I can get a job in a newsroom, that's really great. If I can get a job on air as a reporter, that's really great. If that becomes, you know, I can become an anchor, that's really great.” I feel like I was kind of just like trepidatiously trying to move up in my career without, like, setting these big expectations for myself, partially because I didn't want to set myself up for disappointment, because I realized that as much as I could be as talented, you know, as I could or as, you know, work as hard as I could, there were still gatekeepers that were the decision-makers about whether or not someone like me could occupy those spaces. And I didn't know if I was going to be able to get past those. So, you know, I was very cautiously optimistic about what my possibilities could be in this field.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ginella, it's a question that you probably asked all the time. But I'd be remiss if I didn't ask it. What does your hijab mean to you?

GINELLA MASSA:

You know, it's funny because as much as it's a very public sort of profession of my religion, it is something that is quite personal to me. And I actually don't really talk too much about it because it does feel like a very personal sort of act between me and God and me and my spirituality. So, you know, outwardly, I treat it in many ways like a piece of clothing in the sense that when people look at me, I don't want them to think too much about what it means I can or cannot do, in the sense of my job, anyways. But at the same time, you know, it lets people know about me and some of my values before I even open my mouth. That can be good or bad depending on the circumstance. But I think I surprise people a lot because they do make a lot of assumptions about me, because I wear a hijab and they make assumptions about what type of Muslim I must be. And a lot of that comes from, you know, their understanding of Muslims based on what they see in media, both fiction and news. And that's why I think it's so important for me to continue to do what I'm doing in hijab. I am just doing my job and I happen to be wearing hijab while I'm

doing it. I happen to be a Muslim. There all are lots of Muslims who work in the media and you may not know it because they may not be as visibly Muslim. So for me, you know, I have this one thing that makes me stand out, but at the same time, I don't want people to see it as though it's at odds with my Canadian identity or at odds with my ability to be a journalist.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

It's such it's such an interesting place to be, isn't it? Where this intersection between one's spirituality and confession and yet, you know, really working in such a public, working in the public eye in terms of reporting the news and presenting what's happening every day and making sense of it for people in their own lives. How does it feel to be a Canadian Afro-Latina Muslim woman who's under the gaze of a national audience all the time? In a way, how have you done that on your own terms?

GINELLA MASSA:

Yeah, it's definitely tough. And you've just listed all of the, you know, different identities that I belong to. And often many of those identities get erased because of the fact that there's so much focus on me being Muslim, me wearing hijab. But as you said, I am Afro-Latina. I come from a Spanish speaking country. I come from a family that converted to Islam. I have lots of Catholic family. I'm a child of immigrants. I'm, you know, a child of a single mother that came to another country barely speaking English. So I have all of these identities. My experience growing up Muslim in Toronto is a little bit different than most people's, because even in the Muslim world, I'm a little bit of an outsider. A lot of times mosques can be sort of assigned by ethnicity, right? And so whichever mosque you go to, if you don't belong to that ethnicity, you may not necessarily fit in, you may not necessarily always belong. So even in those spaces, I always felt like a little bit of an outsider. And in some ways, it's freeing because it allowed me to navigate my Islam in a way that makes sense to me. It is difficult to feel like you are representing an entire community. But that community is not a monolith. So, this is part of also why I think it's so important for us to continue to have diversity in media in the sense that there can't just be one. There can't just be one Muslim woman in hijab on television that the entire Muslim community can look up to. I'd love to see lots of different Muslim women in hijab, in media. And there are and there have been after me, which I think is amazing because I didn't want to be the first or the only. I wanted to open the door a crack for people behind me so that if maybe I'm not the person that people, you know, necessarily see as their representative, they have other options of people that they can look to as well.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER

Ginella wasn't born into a Muslim family. She was born in Panama to Catholic parents. After her parents divorced, her mom took Ginella and her sister to Canada when she was just a year old. In Canada, her mom remarried and converted to Islam. So when they went back to visit family in South America, they stood out.

GINELLA MASSA:

It was an interesting experience because here we were, this Muslim family, going back to our, you know, a Latin American country, to our Catholic family, explaining to them over Christmas that we can't have any of the lovely ham that they have prepared for Christmas dinner. You

know, walking around in Panama where I mean, I think the Muslim population is, like, less than one percent. And having, you know, kids ask me, “Are you a nun?” And I’m like, “No, I’m Muslim and this is my religion.” They’d be like, “Oh.” And Panamanians are so funny. Like, they’re not mean or rude, but they’re very direct. And if they have a question, they will ask you to your face and it can come off kind of rude, but they’re just curious and they just want to know. And so, you know, those first few years of visiting my family and trying to get them to understand this religion that we’re in and what we do and what we don’t do. And then them realizing that we’re like still the same as we were when we left. And so we have a really great relationship with them.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Tell me a little bit more about your mom and particularly this incredible spiritual journey that she went on, but which kind of seems to infuse her whole life.

GINELLA MASSA:

When I think about my mom’s story, I think about how I don’t know if it was brave or crazy. You know, I think people at the time looked at her like she was crazy, but she had these big goals and these big dreams. She had come to Canada to study English and decided that she wanted to try and build a life here with very little resources, very little support. And she just went for it. And so, yeah, I mean, that is definitely an attitude that she’s instilled in me and my siblings. And then also growing up, you know, being Muslim, she tried to create spaces for us, to make us feel like we were important parts of our community. We should not feel like our Muslim identity was at odds with our Canadian identity. And, us wearing hijab or being Muslim shouldn’t stop us from participating in society in general. And, so she was the one who was always at the school making sure that — you know, asking the school if they would do an assembly for Eid, or giving out candy in your classroom to your classmates during, you know, Ramadan or Eid. She was lobbying the local community pool to offer women-only swim time so that me and my sister could go swimming and get swimming lessons. She would organize sports for girls. So she was always trying to make sure that if these spaces didn’t exist for us — so that we wouldn’t feel like we couldn’t participate — she would create those spaces for us or she would, you know, lobby for them. And that’s probably where that attitude comes from for me, feeling like, “Yeah, there are no Muslim women in hijab in news, but that doesn’t mean that I can’t make that happen.”

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

What was it like for you to grow up in Toronto, the world’s most ethnically diverse city?

GINELLA MASSA:

Toronto is home for me. I’ve lived here my entire life, essentially, and it was great to grow up in a multicultural city. In my elementary school, I was one of two girls wearing hijab and the other one was my sister. But when we did start wearing hijab in elementary school and, you know, my mom would do these assemblies for Eid and things like that, you know, then like all the Muslims started coming out of the woodwork like, “Oh, you’re Muslim? I’m Muslim, too.” And like, you know, we were almost trailblazers in that sense that people felt like it was something they didn’t need to hide or be ashamed of. And, you know, it was a little bit tough after 9/11. I was in high school and, you know, my parents were really scared about what the reaction was going to be.

And, you know, there's a time where my mom actually said to me and my sister, "If you guys want to remove your hijab, that's OK. Don't feel like you now have to wear this and deal with potential negative reactions." But we were our mother's daughters in the sense that we were like, "No, we're like, we're not going to change who we are just because other people don't understand us." But what was interesting for me was entering the world of news and, you know, my first internship in one of the biggest local newsrooms in the country here in Toronto, coming from the most diverse city in the world and walking into that newsroom and seeing how it really was not diverse at all. And suddenly I was very much an other. I was very much this foreign sort of thing. And that was a strange experience for me because I never really felt that way growing up in Toronto.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

You know, you're a storyteller. You report the news, you tell the stories. I wonder if there's one story that is sort of emblematic or meaningful to you about your home city.

GINELLA MASSA:

Oh, that's a tough one. You know, the big one that kind of jumps out in my mind is the Yonge Street van attack.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER.:

In April 2018, a man deliberately drove a van into pedestrians along Yonge Street, near Sheppard Avenue. It's a bustling area in the north end of Toronto, filled with businesses, shopping centres, and restaurants. He killed 10 people and injured many more.

NEWS CLIP – GINELLA MASSA:

"...People have been here at this makeshift memorial all evening for a number of vigils, some of them planned, some of them ad hoc and even here in the rain, at 11 o'clock at night, there are still dozens of people here paying their respects. And we spoke with some area residents..."

GINELLA MASSA:

I had spent so much time in that neighbourhood. We would go for sushi in the neighbourhood. We would go, you know, and go to the movies, you know, Yonge and Sheppard area. So telling those stories, you know, as a journalist, you're supposed to be unbiased, objective. But sometimes you also have to remember that you're human and that, you know, it's okay to feel sad and to look up and down the street and think about, "That could have been me." And so speaking to people with that kind of humanity, speaking to people with that kind of empathy, seeing that pain and really feeling like, these people are one of you — these are your fellow Torontonians who are hurting and you're hurting just as much as they are.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

For those of us who follow you on social media and love sort of seeing the behind the scenes of your news-making life, one of the things that really strikes me, Ginella, constantly. and I find it really — it's really powerful and heartening, actually — is the incredible network of friends and colleagues you have in the industry, other women of colour, other black and brown professional journalists. And there's so much that you seem to do to lift each other up. How do you lift up

those around you and find support and fight the good fight in journalism, a field, as you said, that is often so, so monocultural?

GINELLA MASSA:

Yeah, I mean, I definitely sort of found my tribe in the broadcast news world. We can vent or we can discuss or we can ask for advice or say, you know, “This happened in my newsroom, I don't know how to deal with it,” or “Have you guys ever had to deal with anything like this?” A lot of us are really just this generation sort of navigating this world really for the first time. You know, I didn't have mentors when I was coming up that looked like me or had similar experiences as me. I did have mentors in the field who were white, who were my champions and my allies. But I didn't have as many mentors who had similar experiences to me, and definitely not women in hijab. I think there was one journalist in hijab who is a writer for the *Star* — that's Noor Javed — that I could think of. And she dealt with a lot of hate. I've talked to her now about how we are able to have kind of groups of, you know, group discussions with other Muslim reporters about how we deal with certain things. And, you know, she's like, “I really didn't have that when I was coming up in the industry. I was really by myself.” And so now we at least have those sort of friendships and relationships where we can really lean on each other. And I think that's also the important thing, is feeling like there's room for all of us. We're not in competition with each other. We shouldn't be like, “Well, there can only be one Muslim journalist, or one Black journalist or one female.” There's room for all of us. And we should all be at the table in our various newsrooms. And for most of us, we're used to often being the only person in the room, the one who has to pipe up and say, “Oh, I think maybe we should think about this differently or cover this differently.” So I think that we see the value in that camaraderie as opposed to competition. And, you know, when you work in news, often, that's exactly how you frame other networks, right? They're the competition. So if I work for one network you don't want to necessarily, you know, give away all your stuff to the competition. But I think that we see news as a public good, as not something to be hoarded by one news station, but rather, you know, if you have a good story, it needs to be told.

DR. ULRIKE AL-KHAMIS

Hello, I am Dr. Ulrike Al-Khamis, Interim Director and CEO of the Aga Khan Museum. If you are enjoying our *This Being Human* podcast, why not visit our website at Agakhanmuseum.org? Here, you will find a treasure trove of digital collections and online resources related to the arts and achievements of the Muslim world. From historical artifacts and thought-provoking exhibitions, to a wide range of educational materials and contemporary living arts performances. All of this is made possible from the vision and dedication of Prince Aynn Aga Khan and his Highness The Aga Khan himself to encourage an appreciation of the cultural threads that bind us all together. Again, our website is Agakhanmuseum.org. And now, back to *This Being Human*.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

A couple of years ago, Ginella had a health scare. She had to go through a medical procedure and lost 40 pounds in the process. The reactions she got from the people around her led her to

write an essay for *Chatelaine* magazine called “Don’t Expect A ‘Thank You’ When You Compliment My New Body.”

GINELLA MASSA:

Yeah, it was a really crazy time in my life. I had just gotten married five months before, so I was in a new marriage. And I discovered this mass in my pancreas. And, actually, the way that I discovered it is I had had a cyst there about 12 years before. So I had recently switched family doctors and I was gone for a physical. She was a young woman who was kind of new in practice and she said, “OK, well, anything else you want to discuss?” And I said, “You know, I had this thing like 10 years ago and I never had any follow up for it. And I’ve always wondered if it could come back.” And she said, “OK, I’ll send you for an ultrasound.” And she did. And there it was — this seven-centimetre mass. She described it kind of like a, as a bunch of grapes. In a lot of ways, I was lucky because it was in the pancreas. And pancreatic cancer is, like, known as a silent killer in the sense that most people don’t feel any symptoms until they’re, like, Stage 4. And once they realize it’s there, it’s too late. So I was extremely, extremely lucky that my doctor had sent me, had allowed me to go for this when I was having no symptoms, just out of, you know, curiosity and peace of mind. So I had it removed. So that was, you know, a difficult, you know, a major surgery. I had part of my pancreas removed. I had a part of my stomach removed. I had my gallbladder removed. So my entire digestive system was rearranged and the recovery was more than just recovering from a surgery like my digestive system. My diet had to be super strict because it was very sensitive. It couldn’t digest certain things — you know, wheat, red meat, dairy, anything fried. I just had a lot of restrictions. And as a result, obviously, I lost a ton of weight. And, you know, people around me started commenting about it. And, you know, I work in an industry that is very much focused on how you look. I would get emails from viewers, “Oh my gosh, you lost so much weight. You look amazing. What did you do?.” And then people who did know that I had gone through surgery, people close to me who were like, “Oh, you look so amazing because you lost so much weight.” And it was frustrating because I was like, “You know what I’m going through, like, you know, how difficult things have been.” And this is coming from somebody who loves food, okay? Like food brings me so much joy and food just became a source of anxiety in the sense that I never knew what was going to upset my stomach. I would go on vacation and I couldn’t find anything to eat. And like, there were times where I would be, like, crying because I was either I was caught between either being in pain or being hungry.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ginella, you wrote that coming to terms with your food restrictions felt like mourning the loss of a friend. That really struck me, especially in the cultures that we come from, where food has so much meaning. That must have been incredibly challenging.

GINELLA MASSA:

Absolutely. Food is a way of expressing love. Food is a way of expressing joy. We eat when we celebrate. So much of our culture is around food. And so having to do that three times a day, 365 days a year, and think about what am I going to do for my next meal? Am I going to have to miss out on this stuff? You know, that was really, really hard. And so it was almost adding insult

to injury when people were like, “Oh, but you look amazing.” And was like, “Yeah, but I'm really hungry and I just want a piece of pizza.” So, you know, explaining to people that it wasn't necessarily something to celebrate, and that I was actually having a really hard time, there was just this disconnect with some people. And I think after I wrote that article, it was eye opening for a lot of people.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

I spoke to Ginella just a couple of weeks before the launch of her new CBC show, *Canada Tonight*. So I had to ask her how she was feeling as she was preparing — once again — to make history.

GINELLA MASSA:

It feels surreal. It feels really surreal. And for me, it comes down to the journalism. I want to be able to tell stories of people who don't always get heard. I want to be able to speak to people who don't always get opportunities to speak. That's what's really exciting for me, is to be part of this show in terms of the development, in terms of, you know, editorial decision-making. That was a big reason that I came and, you know, hearing from the folks who hired me that they want to hear my ideas, they want to be able to include these different voices, and that they're really trying to do something different with this show than what they've done before. That's really exciting for me.

I'll admit there's also a lot of pressure. There is, you know, because of the fact that there's this title — “first hijab-wearing news anchor in Canada” — that I have to prove myself, that I have to work twice as hard. That there's no room for failure, that there's no room to be mediocre, because I know that there are people who will look at my hiring in this role and think that I'm just filling a box, that I'm just ticking a diversity quota. I'm constantly fighting my own imposter syndrome. And on top of that, I feel the need to show people that I have worked really hard and that I've earned this spot. There was a long, rigorous interview process. I had to pitch an entire show concept. I know I wasn't the only person, you know, in the running for this role. I didn't have connections and networks. And I had to be my own cheerleader. And, you know, that's really hard sometimes, feeling like I want to do a good job personally because, you know, this is my career and I want to be the best that I can be, but also feeling like I have to overcome these ideas about why I'm here. And on top of that, I have to, you know, represent my community and do them proud. So it's a lot. It's a lot on my shoulders.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Ginella, what does this being human mean to you?

GINELLA MASSA:

This being human means to me that everyone has a story and we should hear it, whether it is something that is going to lift us up and make us feel happiness and gratitude and delight, or whether it's going to be, as the poem says, you know, a crowd of sorrows. Sometimes being human is to recognize the sadness and the traumatic moments and the difficult parts of humanity. And we shouldn't turn away from them.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK:

Thank you so much for joining us on *This Being Human*.

GINELLA MASSA:

Thank you so much. A delight to talk to you.

ABDUL-REHMAN MALIK VOICEOVER:

This Being Human is an Antica production. Our senior producer is Kevin Sexton. Our supervising producer is Pacinthe Mattar. This episode was produced by Ebyan Abdigir and written by Kevin Sexton. Mixing and sound design by Phil Wilson. Original music by Boombox Sound. The executive producers are Kathleen Goldhar and Lisa Gabriele. And Stuart Coxe is the president of Antica Productions.

This Being Human is generously supported by the Aga Khan Museum, one of the world's leading institutions that explores the artistic, intellectual, and scientific heritage of Islamic civilizations around the world. For more information about the museum go to www.agakhanmuseum.org