

*What is AAANY?*

Are you someone with a substance use disorder looking for support and treatment? See Marwa Janini. Are you involved in a relationship with a destructive partner and looking for a way out? See Marwa Janini. Are you a recent immigrant to the US, and someone from the United States Citizenship and Immigration Services has contacted you about your visa status? By now, you should know where this is going.

Is Marwa Janini a superhero out of a comic book? Not exactly, but she and her staff at AAANY may seem like the "Avengers" to the immigrant and working-class members of the Bay Ridge community they serve in Brooklyn.

Marwa is the Executive Director of the Arab American Association of New York (AAANY). Located in Bay Ridge, Brooklyn, AAANY assists all members of the Bay Ridge Community facing a wide assortment of economic and social problems.

Speaking with me over the phone days after giving birth to her second child, Marwa offered insight into the activities of the predominantly Arab American women-staffed organization she oversees. She also told me a little about her personal background and her rise in the non-profit organization that has been serving the Bay Ridge community for close to two decades.

Marwa was born to Palestinian parents who immigrated from Venezuela and Nicaragua to the United States in the 1980s. Many Palestinian refugees fled to parts of Central and South America after the 1967 Arab-Israeli War. For that reason, Marwa grew up in a household where Spanish was spoken as frequently as Arabic and English. In Marwa's house, you would be just as likely to hear a song from Mexican pop singer Juan Gabriel as you would a recitation from the Quran her mom plays on her satellite television.

It was during her years as a university student that Marwa began her career in humanitarian work and public service. She volunteered for a charity organization in Ghana. She also taught English to Syrian refugees on the Turkish border. She attributes both of these experiences as "life-changing" and "humbling."

After attaining her Master's degree in Middle Eastern Studies, Marwa was eager to find a career that would fulfill her desire to help others. As an Arab American Muslim woman who frequented Bay Ridge her whole life to socialize, shop, dine in Middle Eastern restaurants, and go to the mosque, she would often pass by the office of the AAANY.

In December 2012, Marwa decided to take her resume and walk into AAANY's office to see if there were any professional opportunities for her. She was interviewed immediately and given an internship on the spot by the Executive Director. The Executive Director of AAANY at the time was none other than the renowned activist and one of the organizers of the historic "Women's March," Linda Sarsour.

Initially at AAANY, Marwa worked in the immigration, community engagement, youth activities, and outreach departments. "They threw me everywhere in the beginning," Marwa stated while laughing. After demonstrating her excellence and dedication to her work in a short amount of time, Marwa was hired as a Legal Representative in the Immigration department. Years later, when Marwa is out in public doing things like shopping, former clients stop her and express gratitude for the help they received from her.

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Marwa was eventually promoted to the job of Immigration department manager. Her seemingly meteoric rise did not end there: In June 2019, she was asked to serve as the interim director of AAANY. In May 2020 she was officially granted the title of Executive Director, currently supervising four departments and a staff of over 20.

As Executive Director at AAANY, Marwa's job entails a considerable amount of responsibility. She and her staff assist clients dealing with issues such as mental trauma, anxiety, depression and domestic violence. "We serve a community that attributes or connects their mental and emotional health to their physical health and often think their pain is only physical. If they are feeling depressed, for example, they may connect that to physical pain..." Because of this, "every staff member is trained in mental health interventions and coping strategies. When they see that there are signs of depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts, then we send them over to mental health professionals to get these clients the help they need," Marwa stated.

Marwa and her staff at AAANY also deal with a number of domestic violence cases. According to Marwa, educating and empowering clients dealing with these issues is key. "We want them [the victims] to do something with their life. At least our goal is [for them] to have a... primary education, you know, for the betterment of their household and their children."

Marwa is quick to point out that although AAANY is an Arab American organization, it provides services to "Bay Ridgers" from all walks of life: "we serve everyone... regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation or religion." For example since the COVID-19 crisis began this March, AAANY has distributed close to 200,000 meals to a diverse community of clients. If you visit AAANY's Facebook page, you can see photos of long lines of what appear to be Latino, Asian, European, and Middle Eastern "Bay Ridgers" waiting to receive the free boxed meals from Marwa and her staff.

With a sense of joy in her voice, Marwa shared with me that AAANY recently was awarded a grant from New York city that will allow the non-profit to continue its efforts to help those in Bay Ridge facing financial hardship as a result of the COVID-crisis. Besides offering free meals, AAANY is also providing clients with prepaid debit cards that they can shop with.

When I emailed Marwa the first draft of this article to review, she asked me to consider down playing her role at AAANY because she does not want to be "perceived as some type of savior."

And while superheroes do not exist in reality, it's hard not to recognize the good works of Marwa and her AAANY staff as heroic.