

Shakira Refos

Oral History Transcription

Shakira Refos: My name is Shakira Refos, I am 33 years old, and I have lived in Sarasota on and off for 17 years.

Giulia Heyward: Can you tell me a little about how you came to Sarasota?

Shakira Refos: So I was born in the Netherlands in April of 1984. My parents met in July of 1983. My father is from Trinidad and made his way to the Netherlands and my mom is from Suriname, which is an old Dutch colony. Suriname was annexed in 1975, and a big wave of Suriname people went to the Netherlands for greater opportunities, as it is somewhat of a banana republic still at the time. She went to medical school there, and decided that she wanted to become a physical therapist. My parents met, and there was a bunch of passion, and then *[laughs]* not too long after *[gestures to self]*. My dad said to me once that it “only took like five times,” just something really classy, to describe my genesis.

Giulia Heyward: At what age did you move to Sarasota?

Shakira Refos: We moved to Sarasota when I was five or six. My mother was a physical therapist and, in Sarasota, there was a misratio of elderly, retired people and physical therapists. They started recruiting people from different countries and my mother doesn't like the cold and doesn't particularly like Dutch people, so she took the opportunity to come to Florida, and took me with her. We landed in Clearwater--I remember it really well because, when we first came over, I was so distraught because I was really close to our whole family, that she thought *Oh my god, what have I done?* Then, she took me to the beach. It was the first time I had been to an

actual beach and I was sold! They set us up with a green card, an apartment and a car--my mom has been living in Sarasota ever since.

Giulia Heyward: What was it about the beach that you think attracted you so much to Sarasota?

Shakira Refos: It's just a completely different environment: playing in the sand, playing in the water.

Giulia Heyward: While you were in Sarasota, you attended elementary school--can you talk about what that was like?

Shakira Refos: Coming to middle school here, I was always a very distracted child. Netherlands is a very liberal country *and* I was going to a Montessori school in a very liberal country. I was so out of control, so wild [in Sarasota] that my mom decided that it would be best if I went to the Netherlands to further my education. I remember that I tested for Pineview, a school for the gifted here in Sarasota, and they had told me that I was not "emotionally prepared" to go to Pineview.

Giulia Heyward: What do you think are the biggest differences between the Netherlands and Sarasota? What do you see to be the gaping distinctions between the two?

Shakira Refos: I think that Dutch people are very blunt and very to the point. Americans generally are really like--I don't wanna say phoney, because that's not the correct word--Americans are like *a lot* and kind of exhausting. I found that Americans kind of beat around the bush a lot and don't really say what they think in order to be polite. *[pauses]* The States definitely have a consumer culture that is lot more prevalent: gifts that we give each other all the time, gifts for Christmas. A lot of Dutch families have dinner together and it's considered abnormal if you don't. Mindfulness in school is something that's huge that you don't come across in American schools a lot.

Giulia Heyward: Why do you come back to Sarasota?

Shakira Refos: I was twelve. I was living in the Netherlands with my father and, although he had really good intentions, I don't think he was capable of it at the time. Someone at the school, or my babysitter, insinuated that my mom should come back. My mother came back, my brother was conceived and then my parents broke up. My mom still didn't like the Netherlands so she said, "Let's go back." We returned back to Sarasota and I went to Sarasota Middle School for the seventh grade.

Giulia Heyward: What was that like?

Shakira Refos: Sarasota Middle was wild! It's in south Sarasota, it's an extremely white area. I think things are changing up a little bit now but this was in '96. I was hitting puberty hard--I was surrounded by white people. I was always kind of used to be surrounded by white people because my mom would put me in white schools in the Netherlands. Coming back after having had more freedom--because Dutch kids are given a lot of independence. I was used to that and then, coming back to the States, to Sarasota Middle School, it was arguably not just white, but also oppressive. I wasn't aware that I was black in that environment but they were very aware that I was black in that environment. There is something to having a group of mid-teenagers walk in a single file line to lunch or sitting in alphabetical order. I just fought against every party of it at SMS. The other issue was that it was a very wealthy school, which isn't an issue, but is just something is to be noted. I think that, at the time while I was having all of these crazy hormonal situations, going through the puberty, the more I wanted to be let free, the tighter my mom held onto me. Being surrounded by these kids whose parents let them do a lot of things that I just was not able to do was kind of complicated. And I was always grounded--like always!

Giulia Heyward: Have you heard of that new reality TV show, Siesta Key? Do you feel as if that represented the kids that you had gone to school with?

Shakira Refos: No, because I was grounded all the time! And I had always surrounded myself with kids who were into art. The Siesta Key, or at least that generation, of students I avoided, I always hung around thoughtful kids.

Giulia Heyward: What was it like attending Booker Middle School?

Shakira Refos: Booker was phenomenal, Booker was an incredible experience. I was able to, not that I ever thought I was an actor but, performing has always been kind of fun. I figured out how to sing when I went to Booker. The stereotype about Booker is that it's a black school and basically the performing and visual arts were there to bring white students in to that school. When you told anyone that you were going to Booker, they would talk about drugs or gangs or that kind of stuff. When I went to Booker, it was the most rewarding, most nurturing experience. Thinking of all of my friends who had gone to Riverview or God bless Cardinal Mooney--talk about drugs or gangs! The way that the people who lived in the community, and mixed in with the theater group, everyone was just very open. You were able to express whatever you wanted to at Booker.

Giulia Heyward: Why do you think that you were so attracted to the arts? Why did you want to integrate yourself in it?

Shakira Refos: I don't know because I'm a terrible actor! So it had nothing to do with actual talent--I think it was just being able to be creative. I've always been into creative writing and I've always been a crazy reader. It was just that I got to be creative in a sense that was not constricting at all. They just let us find ourselves.

Giulia Heyward: So how exactly did you end up creating Ringling Underground? How old were you at the time?

Shakira Refos: Well, I graduated from high school before I went to college in the Netherlands at University of Utrecht. I picked up History and Education as a major and remained there for eight years.

Giulia Heyward: How did you get from there to Ringling Underground?

Shakira Refos: I was working at the [Ringling] Museum as a Promotions Assistant. When I was in college, and was really not performing very well in school, as a hobby, I had picked up emceeing at hip hop events. I had experience in event production and parlayed that into a job at the [Ringling] museum. The idea was that they wanted to attract a younger audience. They had this event called Ringling by the Bay, it was 6 to 9 p.m. at the bay with a cover band. They thought that, if they could just promote it the right way, that kids were going show up--and that didn't happen. Meanwhile, I had had this idea of art on the lawn and original, indie music. I pitched it, I wrote it up. The concept of Ringling Underground, as it is produced now, is exactly as I had conceptualized it with art on the lawn, music playing under the Statue of David, free for kids, free food available, having the galleries open, and not telling people that they can't bring their food in. How do you create a space where people feel like they own a part of the museum, like own a part of this art space and make this space accessible? It's by making it into a mini-festival and that's what we did. We had a lot of issues with security guards being afraid that students were going to touch the arts, as if college students are fucking savages. We really had to adjust their thinking: barefoot, nobody is going to die. The Ringling has always been, and rightfully so, such an important of Sarasota history that it's been handled so delicately and so

much bureaucracy. People have been so careful of these spaces but, if you want younger people to feel as if they have a place in these spaces, then you have to open it up to them.

Giulia Heyward: What year did Ringling Underground begin?

Shakira Refos: September 2012--so it's been five years.

Giulia Heyward: At what point did you leave, because it was essentially your baby?

Shakira Refos: Definitely! I had emceed and was in charge of getting college kids there. I left Ringling Museum and still emceed at Ringling Underground until there was a change in the guard of the system and I ended up no longer being in it.

Giulia Heyward: Why did you leave specifically?

Shakira Refos: Because they didn't wanna pay me! Well, they did pay, me but it was very little for what they were paying me. With the change of the guard in the events departmentt, the people who knew me, loved me, and created Ringling Underground with me, weren't there. The new people were kind of like: "We don't need you, we don't need to pay you, because others will do it for free," without understanding my role or history with this program. Major arts institutions in Sarasota have this idea that it's a privilege to be doing what we're doing, it's a generational thing too. You have to remember that Sarasota is filled with older people who are used to doing things a different way. The culture just hasn't changed like you do see in bigger cities. The brain drain is huge here: people go to school here and then they leave, people don't really help to change that culture be more flexible, and so no one is forcing institutins to change. I think there are a few of us in town who try to continue to make a more progressive Sarasota. A lot of people move and are like "Fuck it, let's move somewhere else!" and I just haven't quite gotten to that place.

