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Voices from the Valley: Mehmet ‘Mo’ Casey

By: **SHERRI CORNETT** | June 24, 2018



Ed Kemmick/Last Best News

Mehmet “Mo” Casey is seen near the “Welcome to Billings” sign just above the campus of MSU Billings, where he is an international admission and advising specialist.

Voices from the Valley is an occasional series of conversations between Sherri Cornett and Billings-area leaders who are committed to creating a vibrant community for all. This is the final installment of the series.

Having lived his whole life in Baghdad, Iraq, Mehmet “Mo” Casey’s path to leaving the deteriorating conditions there came through a Fulbright scholarship to teach Arabic at Rocky Mountain College. He is currently an international admission and advising specialist at MSU Billings and had much to share about the journey of assimilating into a new culture.

Sherri: Would you share with me the story behind your nickname, Mo?


Mo: I was born as Mohamed El Qaisi, but when I sought a passport, Saddam Hussein had already been overthrown and Iraq was under the Coalition Provisional Authority. The passport system became a hybridization of Iraqi and U.S. practices. Iraqi names are your given name followed by your father’s given name, then your grandfather’s given name and finally your family name. Since, in the U.S., you just use first, middle and last, they took my first three names. I ended up with Mohamed Jasim Mohamed or Mohamed Mohamed.

People here started calling me Mo. However, I wanted to get back something of my real name. Mehmet is Turkish, my mother’s native language, and a less provocative term in the U.S. for Mohamed. I Anglicized El Qaisi by making my middle initial “L” and my last name Casey. My nickname stayed Mo, because, well, the short of Mehmet would be Meh, as in “indifferent!”

Sherri: When your first-ever trip outside of Baghdad, a city of nearly 9 million people, is to Billings, Montana, there must be some culture shock.

Mo: Yes, but in a good way. I was agitated in Baghdad for one reason or another. It wasn't until I moved here that I realized I didn't like the congestion of large cities. Here I can think. I am calmer.

On the streets of Baghdad you don't make contact with people. When I first arrived here, I jumped every time someone walked by and nodded or said hi. It seemed so bizarre for me. It took me awhile to adjust to responding and, eventually, initiating such kindness.

 [_ \(https://goo.gl/mjhWkW\)](https://goo.gl/mjhWkW)

Sherri: What else was different here?

Mo: In Iraq, only politicians did public speaking ... or, in the classrooms, teachers.

I always wondered who might be in the crowd, checking on me ... that I might be targeted. When I first started presenting, I saw jaws dropping in the audience and thought, "Wow, this must be an acting class trying to make me feel better." But, then it happened again and again and I thought, "There can't be that many different actors!" This made me think that I must have something interesting to say.

Having grown up Muslim, everyone here thought I would know more about Islam than I did. As in many oppressed cultures, you just do things; you don't have the right to know why. I ended up learning more about my religion while living outside of Iraq, by calling and asking my father, than living there.

Sherri: When I directed a project in northern China, I was surprised how suppression took the form of discouraging the use of personal statements, such as "I am" or "I think." Do you see such challenges with the international students at MSU Billings?

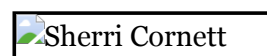
Mo: Yes, a lot of students come from such regimes. They might have some liberty, but not absolute freedom of speech. Being a figure of authority — telling others about their country, culture and lives — is uncomfortable.

Asian students, in particular, are hesitant to speak in public. First, they don't want to lose face by making mistakes, being offensive or not knowing the answer. Some assume we know everything here and that they have nothing new to share. I tell them about my experiences when I first spoke in public and I remind them that they are insiders to their ways of life. And, that, despite supposed free access to information, the knowledge people have here is limited by their own priorities and by what the media chooses to focus on.

Sherri: The power of the individual story! It can overcome stereotypes, rumors and those things in the media that have no basis in fact. What else would you like people to know about international students here?

Mo: First, that we do have international students ... over 100 at MSU Billings alone. From Saudi Arabia, China and Iran and hopefully more from Pakistan, Nepal and India ... and that no one is alike. We are all unique, complex and diverse.

For some of the reasons I said before, it is hard for students to reach out into our community. And, English might be their second or third or fourth language. They may not know how to initiate a conversation. I encourage the students to take risks and I invite our larger community to also take a chance and attend public forums where there are opportunities to talk with students. It might be a bit awkward the first time, but a connection will have been started and, the next time, it will be easier. It is a first step to learning more about each other, our different cultures, food and music!



Sherri Cornett

With degrees in political science and art and a long history of advocacy work, Sherri Cornett's passion for dialogue and community has found outlets in the national and international social-justice-themed exhibitions she curates, her own art and the organizations and causes into which she contributes her energy and leadership. After 14 moves, Cornett finally found her home in Billings in 1993. www.sherricornett.com (<http://www.sherricornett.com/>).

Here are the previous installments of Voices from the Valley:

- ◆ April 22, [Claudia Stevens](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stevens/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-claudia-stevens/>).
- ◆ April 30, [Fitzgerald Clark](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/04/voices-from-the-valley-fitzgerald-clark/>).
- ◆ May 6, [Gwen Kircher](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-gwen-kircher/>).
- ◆ May 14, [Marci McLean](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-marci-mclean/>).
- ◆ May 20, [Tyson Middle](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-tyson-middle/>).
- ◆ May 27, [Patrick Scott-Wilson](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/05/voices-from-the-valley-patrick-scott-wilson/>).
- ◆ June 3, [Abena Lane](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-abena-lane/>).
- ◆ June 10, [Sonia Davis](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-sonia-davis/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-sonia-davis/>).
- ◆ June 17, [Taylor Tellez](http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-taylor-tellez/) (<http://lastbestnews.com/site/2018/06/voices-from-the-valley-taylor-tellez/>).

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