

Melungeon Voices Podcast Season Three Transcript, Episode Three: Katya Faris

Lis Malone: Welcome to the Melungeon Voices Podcast presented by the Melungeon Heritage Association. My name is Lis Malone, Podcast Producer and I'm here with the lovely Heather Andolina, the president of the MHA. Heather. What's going on with you this week?

Heather Andolina: This week? Well Lis, we're speaking to Katya Faris about a little-known syndrome that is connected to the Melungeon people.

Lis: Hmm. So, tell us a little bit about Katya

Heather: Katya Faris holds Master's in ethno-Musicology, as well as Jyotisha Vedic Astrology. Originally from Hindustan, Indiana, she is a certified Jyotisha Vedic astrologer, Middle Eastern dance artist, music producer, tarot reader and master level Reiki healing practitioner.

In today's episode, we learn more about Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, commonly referred to as EDS. Its symptoms, how someone manages life with EDS, and how this may have connections to the Hmong luncheon people.

Lis: Let's check it out.

Heather: Hello, everyone, and welcome back to another episode of Melungeon Voices. And we have with us Katya Faris. Hello, Katya.

Katya: Hello.

Heather: All right, well, we're just going to get right into it. I often like to start off with this question, would you please share your personal story about your ancestry and ties to the Melungeon people?

Katya: Basically, my mother is from Oklahoma, and she's from Tulsa. And growing up, I would always ask her about, you know, her grandparents, and she would say, well, I didn't get to spend much time with them, especially her father's mother, Maggie, because he was like, the ninth child. And so, they actually passed away when he was a teenager, and he went to live with his eldest sister. So, a lot of things got lost. But she did tell me that on her father's side, which the surname is Walker, and that is a name, you know, used by, you know, white, Black and Indian peoples. So, that was a little vague, and I several years just kind of swept it under the rug. And then, you know, growing older having my daughter and tried to explain to her what, you know, our family is, um, we started to do some more research. And she had always told us, or at least me, now, my sister, who's seven years older than me, actually went to live in Iran for 15 years. And so, when I was getting all of this information from my mom, she was overseas. And what she told me was that we were Black Dutch, but she won't talk about it, right. I think in the early 2000s, I got into a yahoo group of the Black Dutch and found out that there are eight different kinds of Black Dutch. It's something used again by several people to mean several different things. And one of them was cover for a luncheon. Oh, and then my grandparents were, one was the quarter Cherokee, and one was a quarter Choctaw, we were told, this was our oral history, right? Black Dutch quarter each. I think in about 2009, I started the DNA tests, and I've done six of them. And they all say something different. And the last one that I did really seem to bring out the truth. And the company is called CRI genetics. And it's their ethnicity estimate seems to be the most accurate. The other

companies were taking out all of my Mediterranean and Native American blood and putting it as European. Which, you know, clearly, I mean, if you look at me, you know, you know that I'm something you know, I'm not all white, you know, something's wrong here. Right. And so, I found the Melungeon group on Facebook, and one of the lovely members pointed me to Jed match, and that just unraveled everything, because, you know, those are the real scientific tests that we need to pay attention to. I found that a lot of these DNA companies are just kind of vague, and they can only tell you what they have in their databank. If they don't have, you know, DNA markers for certain areas of the world, it's not going to show in your ethnicity estimate. But GEDmatch has real scientists that are working on this data, day and night. And, you know, I put my raw DNA file into their system. And there's my Mediterranean blood, there's my Southeast Asian, there's my Native American, and it's all there and every single test that I've done there, and I also did hire ancestry.com.

This past year, I hired them for 40 hours of work with their pro genealogists. And they did find in the census records, B for Black Dutch and then P for Portuguese from our family that came from Chester, South Carolina. It's like untangling a necklace, right? Where is this information coming from and trying to sort out, you know, exactly for us what like that means because I have my master's in ethnomusicology, and I started the music and music doesn't lie. You know, words can be used to deceive, but music doesn't lie. And if you watch the documentary Rumble, about the Native American influence on rock and roll, you'll see that blues music actually comes from the Southeast. And so, there's a lot of heritage that's been erased, for whatever reason. And so, it's been a, you know, long journey of trying to unravel exactly what this is. And so, in this process, I've met a very distant cousin of mine, getting familiar with Brett Kennedy's work and looking at, you know, the disease he had, which was familial, and, you know, comes from Mediterranean. I said, well, what is it that we have that is in common? And she said, well, I've been going down this Ehlers Danlos journey, right. So, it's all kind of coming to a head where I'm finding out not just about my ancestry, but about the health issues have come along with it.

Heather: Yes, Katya, let's go into that. You have a genetic condition called Ehlers Danlos Syndrome, also referred to as EDS. What are some of the symptoms and characteristics of this condition? And what communities are affected by it?

Katya: I think every race on Earth probably has this tendency. But what from what I've observed, there seems to be a higher concentration of people from the Mediterranean and the Middle East that have this. I don't know why. But you can definitely see it in their dances and in their folklore, you know, I'm, I'm very bendy. That's why I was able to belly dance for 20 years. It just seems like it's higher with Mediterranean people and North African, you know, all the whole Mediterranean area. And basically, Ehlers Danlos was codified into 13 subtypes in 2017. The most common one is called hyper mobile, eds. And this one does not need genetic testing. This one can be diagnosed by looking at your injuries and your symptoms. Like for me, hypermobile means, this is a connective tissue disorder, right. So, your connective tissue is what holds your joints together, it's what holds your cells together, there's, you know, it's all over you, it's the glue that holds your body together, okay. And when your connective tissue is super bendy, you can do great gymnastics, great dancing, etc. But you're going to injure yourself and then get stiffer later in life. And what happens is, when you have loose joints, it's not necessarily that the pain is coming from the joint, although it will be very painful if you dislocate it or partially dislocate, like my knee I did last week. A partial dislocation is called a subluxation. That's painful. But the real pain comes from your muscles surrounding your joints that are trying to hold you know do the work

of for to right, they're trying to hold you up. So, we get a lot of cardiovascular issues. There's a lot of pain associated with this. And when you get a flare up, your whole body is affected. For instance, last week when I dislocated my knee, it triggered the degenerative arthritis of my hips and which was above it and then I have two broken toes on this side and a third one that's dislocated and this whole side was just inflamed right? And it just wears you out. Now the other 12 types gosh, I would have to go to the website too. Get all of the specific information. I'm just learning about this myself. But off the top of my head, there's vascular, vascular will show with the this is the only one that has uterine prolapse and the third trimester, there is dental EDS where it affects you know, your teeth. Well, like I said, just go to the website, and you'll find all that information, but it's, you know, something that we're just learning about. And a lot of doctors that have been in the field for a while, aren't as knowledgeable. And they can give you a misdiagnosis, for instance of fibromyalgia, that's very common. And that is concerned with the joint, right, that is pain from the joint.

So, we get misdiagnosed all the time, we get gaslit all the time. Oh, it's all in your head. We gaslight ourselves because like as kids, you know, I was on swim team. And I'd come home exhausted. And the adults would be like, well, can't you keep up with your cousins? You know, why are you so tired? So, you learn to not speak up and you learn to gaslight yourself. And it turns into like now I'm you know, 52 years old. And I'm just now finding out about this. So, I'm so glad that you know, like my daughter has it as well. And so, we're going through the same, you know, genetic testing, you have to go to a rheumatologist which will send you to a geneticist. And that's where they do the chromosome testing because it's in the chromosomes where you can see it, you know, they've said there's 13 subtypes, I think there's probably more like 25, you know, a couple of these can branch off. But we're just learning. And it's just been wonderful being in the Facebook support group, because people come in, and then they tell their stories. And so, I've asked, I've noticed with some of the last names I've seen that are in the group, and I see where they're from. And I've asked a few of them. Oh, you know, do you have Indian or Melungeon heritage and nine times out of 10? They say yes. So, I don't know if it's just something that I'm seeing because, you know, I'm drawn to seeing that.

But a good example of this is Elvis Presley. He is the poster child for vascular EDS. This is why he was in so much pain. It wasn't just drug addiction because of depression. He was in actual physical pain. He and his mother both have the classic vascular EDS symptoms she died at, I think 46 He died at 42 The average lifespan for vascular is I think, 52 you know, they have very large eyes. That's very typical with vascular there's a whole article on the pain network news.com If you just search Elvis Presley, a network news, the article will pop right up, and it will blow your mind because of Elvis, you know, I mean, he was just a workhorse, right? They just worked him to death. And he was just trying to survive with a disease that he didn't even know he had. But he also has Melungeon heritage. So, it's like, you know, hello, and he's super bendy. That's the thing. You know, that's how he could do all of those gyrations and dance moves that he did on stage was because he had a connective tissue disorder.

Heather: Yes, I've heard that he had Melungeon ancestry.

Katya: And, you know, and this comes back to, you know, definitions and terminology. You know, a lot of you know, I've been doing some research on JSTOR, which is the academic, online source for academic journals, and you can search anything. And I'll show you all the journals. And there's quite a few, you know, articles on Melungeons. And it seems that there are two groups. Now you can correct me if I'm wrong, because again, I'm just learning about this. But it seems like there are people that say

that, you know, blondes are just white with black, that they are the certain family names, and they come from this very certain area. And there seems to be another group that includes people that don't necessarily have those names, or they may be there in there somewhere, but it's not as prominent that there's more Native American ancestry. And there seems to be you know, people that don't want to accept the Turkish definition. So maybe you could expound upon that a little bit.

Heather: We do have, everybody has a different family story. And you're right, you do have these core surnames, these core locations where there were Melungeon settlements but there are many as you, as you know, many surnames that are connected to Melungeon's or even just mixed heritage. I have DNA connections to Lumbee's. I know that the Melungeon's and the Lumbee's must share some common ancestors.

Katya: So, and there's another thing that I kind of want to throw out there for people to chew on. Because the native the SE Native Americans have been swept under the rug and their culture has been tried to be made invisible and almost erased, right. Some of the thinking of where the SE Native Americans came from was not necessarily over the land bridge, from Asia, but that they came across the Atlantic from the Mediterranean, or at least some of them. And then once they got here, they mixed. And you can even see it in the language you guys, because there are some words in Basque, that are similar to words in ancient Mayan. And the theory was that it was the mound builders, that they actually were people that came across the Atlantic. And those are the ancestors of the Cherokee, the Iroquois, you know, all of the tribes in the southeast.

And so it could be that what we're seeing in the DNA through Gedmatch is actually Native American, but because we don't have the DNA markers for all the tribes, a lot of them don't want to give up their DNA markers, and you cannot blame them. But our research is incomplete without having it. And I think that we need to have a redefinition of what southeast Native American is, you know, apart Mediterranean, it's not just the sailors come across the sea. And that's just, you know, that is the, you know, I mean, you just can't be, I hate to say it, it just can't be, you know, wide enough for Appalachia, right, everybody's trying to fit in. And that was one of the problems I had with just the strict terminology of Melungeon is just these families and just this type of DNA. And because we're excluding a lot of people, a lot of people that are looking for their heritage, we've already been excluded. Right. And so, let's not exclude people that are also searching. I mean, you know, it's like I said, it's a necklace with a big fat knot in it. And we've got to lay it down on a glass surface and get a couple of needles out and just separate the strands and untangle it.

Heather: Oh, I agree. And I want to go, I want you to elaborate a little more on sharing some insight in the Trail of Tears and your family's connection to the Trail of Tears.

Katya: Sure. Well, when I was working with the pro genealogists at ancestry, the first woman I got was just fantastic. And she also had Melungeon heritage. And so, we're looking at my mother's father's side, the Walkers. And she's like, oh, your great grandmother remarried after your great grandfather died? And I said, yes. Because they were like, 10 years apart, right. And he died early in his 50s. And so, she went off and she married a man by the last name of Goins. Hello. That's one of the five names, right? Yes. And so, she says, Wait a second. She would not be marrying a girl once unless she were all similar engine at that time, because it was this was like early 1900s. Right. Like people just didn't really marry outside of their family. Well, by that time, she was in Norman, Oklahoma. But she had come from a settlement of families in Waxahachie, Texas, which is North Texas. And they went back on Ancestry to

the settlement and looked at the names and they were like, yes, this very well could have been a Black Dutch, you know, I'm putting air quotes Black Dutch, London settlement, just looking at the names, it was lots of Walkers.

So, these people have known each other and then when they moved up into Oklahoma, and my great grandfather died, it was very natural for her to marry somebody from that group. And she said, well, there you have it. This is 99.9% proof that their family's hiding them, you know, using Black Dutch to hide Melungeon when I went because I always questioned like, you know, what do Cherokee people really look like? Because, you know, even by the time they walked on the Trail of Tears, there were very few full bloods most people like three quarters or half, and I was recently driving through Hendersonville, North Carolina, and it was just a total fluke because we were supposed to be staying the night in Knoxville, but there was a big crash up on 14th. So, we had to stop in Hendersonville. And I stayed at this hotel. The woman who was the breakfast manager, and she was telling us about the area and she said, oh, when I'm Cherokee, she said, I'm 100%, Cherokee. She was just the cutest thing we just talked, talked, and I'm looking at her. I'm like, Oh, my God. I can see my mother in her. I can see it in the hairline. I've always associated the widow's peak, you know, with a Native American hairline was very round.

She was very small in stature, not just short, but like petite. And I told her about my family, and she looks at me, and she looks at my cheekbones. And she goes, oh, you have redness in the center of your face at the you know, right where your cheekbones come in. She said, that's a sign of Cherokee. I said, you've got to be kidding me. And she was so kind, she was so welcoming, you know, because she had stayed behind. Right? The natives that have moved into Oklahoma and the reservations, you know, they lived, you know, very, very difficult life. And a lot of them are not very welcoming to people that are mixed, which again, you can understand why I'm not judging. But you know, I've just experienced that. So, it was really nice to meet somebody that was 100%. That was like, welcoming and accepting of me being of mixed heritage.

Heather: We're going to be starting to wrap up, and Katya where can our listeners learn more about you, your work, and your music?

Katya: Well, I've got a couple different websites. I am a retired Middle Eastern dancer. Because of all of my injuries with EDS and the other comorbidities. I've had to retire by just 26 years, my feet are shot. But I love music. And I've been working with an Arab music producer in Detroit. We've already put out one CD, it's called rocks at Katya rocks, that means dances so it's dances of Katya. And it's about half of it is drum solos. And then we did some really lovely melodies as well. And its music that I danced to. And I, we did this because I feel it's important to record the music that is going on in this time. 100 years from now, they're going to be really happy, you know that we're documenting this process, right, things change fast, and, you know, some songs get lost. And so, we're working on a second CD right now, this one is going to be all melodies. And we have pulled out of the closet some songs that have not been heard in forever, some that some people have never even heard. And I really think dancers are going to enjoy it. And this all the music is in like a classic Egyptian style. It's like not like the modern music that's played in Egypt, which is a lot of it is based on hip hop. You know, when I tried to describe an Arab nightclub to people, I say, well, you remember those, you know, mambo clubs of the of the 50s like Lucy. Right now. Yeah, I love seeing Desi Arnaz. And they had the big band up there. And everybody came dressed to the nines, and it was fancy. Those are like the Arab nightclubs. Or at least the old, you

know, the old-fashioned ones, right? We have a live band and you have a whole table, whole tables full of families, right. It's a family event. And so, I wanted to capture that music, because it's changing fast. And all of that can be found plus all of my academic articles when I got my master's in ethnomusicology, I wasn't interested in pursuing my PhD, but I wanted to keep so, doing the research on my own and keep producing the music. So, the website for that is catchy. ferris.com. Since then, I've gotten a second master's in Jyotisha, which is Vedic Astrology. That's astrology from India. Jyotisha means the science of light. And I got that in 2018. And so, since then, I've been working as a professional Vedic astrologer, which I've been obsessed with since I was a little girl like I did Western astrology starting at nine and with my mom, she's the one that had all the books in the house that I would just pour over them, you know, just like So, a sponge, just soak it up, right? And I've been doing it you know, myself all this time. And I was like, I think it's time to get certified and really do this.

I've been doing Tarot for years, just doing this as a hobby and I said, you know, my feet have failed me. And it's time to let's, let's do this. And so that website is Hindustan, astrology.com. And it's Hindustan, because I live in Hindustan, Indiana and people just go, huh? Where does that name come from? Well, it turns out that the little village that I live in, it's about nine miles north of Bloomington, was sacred ground to the Native Americans around here. And you can see why because there's two streams that come together and it's a lot of fresh water. And it's just, it's very, it's the highest point the county and it's just it's very peaceful and serene up here. And I learned from a local who was a tow truck driver for my husband, that his family's property has a mound on it. They've had this property for over 200 years. They've never talked about it. But there is a mound not far from here, the White River is not very far. So anyway, it's very it's very sacred area here. And so, I decided to name my astrology company after it.

There's been a lot of Melungeon information on Tik Tok. And one of them was talking about, you know, it's folklore that this is called the dog days of summer because the star Sirius is high in the sky in the summer. And that's true. And that's another clue in to tie being made to the Middle East. Because astrology as we know it, like the Western astrology, right? That actually came from ancient Persia. You know, Alexander the Great, didn't just burn down Persepolis. He also burned down Persian astrology. And he took it back to Greece. And they dissected and so, did their own thing with it. It's a long story. But anyway, there is a tie I see there in the folklore, and then also in the music.

And this was something that I wanted, you know, we were talking before I wanted to bring to the table because I've spent so much time with Turkish people. They're just some of my best friends. And they always thought, oh, well, she's here at least had something right? You've got to be Turkish or Lebanese, I get that a lot. You're Lebanese, right. It's my name. And that's another thing. My maiden name Ferris is actually Scots Irish for me. But it's also Lebanese. It means night or horse specialist. And it means that in Arabic and in Gaelic, so, you know, I adjusting, I'm telling you, it's deep. There's, there was a lot of stuff that I don't know if we're ever going to figure out.

But what I wanted to talk about was, you know, like we were saying before, a lot of people disregard Brent Kennedy's research about, you know, saying that munchkins are part Turkish and I proposed one, you know, one theory that it's actually on the Native American gene pool. But there's also something else we need to consider. And that is that if these were Turkish sailors coming across the ocean, in the 17th century, we shouldn't be calling them Turks, we should be calling them Ottomans, is a very specific time in history. Turkey is a very big country, saying someone is Turkish is like saying they're American. There's it's a mix. So, if we came from Cheshmeh, Turkey, the Asian would be in there, but not just a

little bit, mostly people that are from this area, they have a lot of Greek, they have a lot of Bulgarian in them. And if they're sailors, the Ottomans were taking Italians all the time and taking them as slaves. There's an Italian component So, there too, in eastern Turkey. And then of course, you've got Cypriot and Lebanese, you know, for sailors, this is the area that they're going to cover. Those races are going to show up more than the what we maybe today would consider Turkish which would be more from Eastern Turkey. You know, of course, you're going to have Armenian, Georgian, there's going to be more of the Asian component, because as the Turco Mongol tribes swept across Anatolia, it lessened as they moved across and move to the Mediterranean as a stronger concentration in the east. So, for me, the way my DNA came out was about 12%, Italian 9%, Bulgarian, like 1%, East Indian Tamil, and then there's the Native American that was about 1%, or one and a half or something. And then there was a South, East Asian and a lot of the Jed match tests that you run.

Now these test parameters are for all different things, not just your ethnicity estimate. Some of these tests are for you know, how much hunter gatherer Do you have versus farmers, you know, but there's definitely a Southeast Asian, and even Oceania, and I get Oceania, and in my Jed match. So, these are things that people need to consider when they throw around this word Turkish. Well, what could you Turkish are you talking about, okay? And what part of history are you talking about? Because if we follow the story, that the sailors were in Spain, Spanish Inquisition happened, they were Muslims, they got kicked out, they went to the Canary Islands, West Indies, West Indies is actually in my folk lore.

From that my mother told me, she said, well, that are Black Dutch, but we also came from the West Indies, and then landed on the shores of Virginia, there's a lot of mixing going along there. And so, you have to consider the time in history when you're talking about using the word Turkish, because what it is today is not the same. Now I do have a very good friend of mine, who is an IR Vedic specialist. She's from Turkey. Her father is from Mersin, which is in the south, like right on the Mediterranean, it's much closer to Syria and Lebanon, and Cyprus. And she's going to do her DNA. And we're going to put it into the GEDmatch and match it up with mine. And we're going to see the differences. It's all keep you tuned, it's going to be really, really interesting, because, you know, she wants to help me unravel this too.

Heather: Katya, we just want to thank you for taking the time and being on our podcast. It was a pleasure talking to you.

Katya: Thank you for having me.

Lis Malone: You've been listening to the Melungeon Voices Podcast. On behalf of myself, Heather Andolina, and the entire MHA executive committee. We'd like to thank all of those who participated in making this episode possible. For more information, you can visit them on the web at www.melungeon.org. The information views and opinions expressed in this podcast episode do not necessarily represent those of the MHA.

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