Walahl's Corner Store
A unique glimpse into the relationship between a Palestinian store owner and his African American customers in Chicago.

08 Feb 2015 15:54 GMT
AlJazeera

The corner store is the living, breathing heart of many economically challenged cities in the US.

"Walahl" runs a small corner store in Englewood, one of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods on the city's south side. A Palestinian immigrant, he belongs to a large population of Arab-Americans, who own the majority of businesses in the predominantly black neighbourhood.

This was once a thriving centre for black owned businesses in the 1960s and 70s, but today it is struggling with violent crime and profound neglect.

Falah Farhoudeh (aka "Walahl"), is a Middle Eastern emigre in his late 60s who has operated a convenience store in Englewood for about a decade. But he is no mere business owner but a crucial part of the community, providing an ex-convict with a job, giving food to customers even when they cannot pay, and offering good counsel to anyone who wants it.

The film plunges into the inner workings of a small business in a tough neighbourhood and the delicate racial balance of two very different communities co-existing. Walahl's Corner Store manages to say a good deal about inner-city US in general and Englewood in particular, and gives an insight into another vision of the American Dream.

Filmmaker's view

By Amina Waheed

Over the last 25 years, Arab American immigrants have been buying up the vast majority of the corner stores in Chicago's south side. You can see them on almost every block. They are like mini quick marts - your one-stop shops for Doritos, soda, and cigarettes. Nearly all of them double up as liquor stores. And nearly all of them are in predominantly black, underserved neighbourhoods like Englewood.

African Americans account for 97 percent of Englewood's population. Yet, they own a very small fraction of the corner stores – considered the most thriving businesses in the area. Moreover, these stores often exist in "food deserts," or neighbourhood pockets where fresh-produce grocery stores do not exist for miles.
It is a familiar scene in other low-income, majority-black urban communities like Detroit, New York, Oakland, and Los Angeles. These stores are part of a multi-layered and largely interdependent economy between long time African American residents and Arab immigrants.

Between working for community-based organisations and as a graduate student, I spent a lot of time in liquor stores in Oakland and Chicago. I recorded their lineages - from the evolving socio-economic and racial dynamics of the neighbourhoods they are based in to the stories of their owners - most of whom are now from Yemen, Jordan, Egypt, and Palestine.

The predominance of these Arab-owned liquor stores in already underserved inner-city communities has undoubtedly lead to elevated feelings of resentment, and racial tensions. They have become part of a long history of unhealthy food options and unfair business practices.

I had every intention of making a film about these liquor stores. And then I met Abu Muhammad.

Abu Muhammad runs a small corner store in Englewood, one of Chicago's poorest neighbourhoods [Witness / Al Jazeera]

Also known as "Walah," now 69-year-old Abu Muhammad has owned the Payless Grocery in the heart of Englewood for the last decade. It is like any other corner store you will see in Englewood – for the most part - including that it serves the special south side delicacy of hot cheese straight into a bag of chips.

But there is one item visibly absent: alcohol. Abu Muhammad is one of a handful of store owners who refuses to sell liquor, despite the fact that he could be making an estimated additional $20,000 per month from its sales. "God doesn't like that," Abu Muhammad says quite simply.

There is something else missing from Walah's store equally striking: a bulletproof window blocking him off behind the register. He does not believe he needs it – even in a neighbourhood where the crime rate is one of the highest in the country. It is a simple gesture that removes a physical barrier that in so many other stores perpetuates fear, misunderstanding, and distrust.

Abu Muhammad's story is a familiar one. Forced to leave his home in Palestine in the lead up to the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, he survived exile by roaming from one country to the next in search of work. He finally settled in the US a little over 20 years ago, where he tried his hand at a variety of businesses. His life is defined by a constant hustle, and his will to survive makes him more like his customers, than he might realise.

Abu Muhammad is not perfect. He rails on the idea of welfare, but creates a kind of lending programme for his customers. He does not sell alcohol, but still sells junk food.
Regardless, Abu Muhammad commands respect, something neighbourhood residents say they do not feel walking into other stores. *Walah's Corner Store* is a candid portrait familiar to many of us: It is about hard work, sacrifice, and friendship – the building blocks of any community.

It is easy to look at Englewood and think it is hopeless. It is by far the most racially segregated neighbourhood in the city. It is also one of the poorest. And the homicide rate is unparalleled. But despite the forces working against it, hopeless is not a category it falls under. People have an unmistakable resiliency and ability to persevere in the face of overwhelming obstacles.

*Walah's Corner Store* is proof of that.