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Muslims reach out

Feeling maligned and misunderstood since 9/11, local worshippers hope to educate others about the Islamic faith.



Farzana Razvi, a substitute teacher at School 30, reads a Dr. Seuss book to her class. She says a new city program that will team Muslims with non-Muslim partners will help break down barriers.

STORY BY DOUG MANDELARO STAFF WRITER / PHOTO BY JAY CAPERS STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A YOUNG MAN approaches his imam and asks, shyly, if it would be a sin against Islam to change his Muslim name.

A faithful but worried Muslim mother asks her young daughter to break a long religious tradition: Stop wearing her head scarf in public.

The spiritual leader of 15,000 area Muslims is singled out for examination as he is about to board a plane in Rochester — understanding the precaution, but wishing one or two lighter-skinned men had been asked to step out as well, so he wouldn't be so embarrassed.

A local college professor feels the need now to state his allegiance to America as a preface before he begins routine discussions

of U.S. foreign policy as part of his course.

Political petitions gather few Muslim names. Peaceful political marches or protests go virtually unattended. Looks from strangers in supermarkets, airports, wherever people congregate, seem to grow longer.

In the year after the 9/11 tragedy, many Rochester-area Muslims join their counterparts nationwide in feeling very much under the microscope, singled out — their most cherished beliefs often misunderstood. Yet those feelings have only strengthened their conviction to reach out to others to educate and to become active partners with non-Muslims in building a better community.

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SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

William McIlvride, left, talks with Yeyha Abdullah at the Rochester Islamic Center in Brighton. Next to them, George Druzziako, talks with Ali Abdulmateen, far right, during a program that paired Muslims with non-Muslims so they could better understand each other.

Muslims

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While they say there have been many shining examples of non-Muslims reaching out and expressing support, they worry about recent news stories that six Lackawanna men are being held by authorities as part of a suspected terrorist cell. The men's Muslim faith has been featured prominently in news coverage.

"It has not been a very good year for Muslims. Our lives changed completely," says Aly Nahas of Brighton, a longtime leader in the local Muslim community, which numbers an estimated 15,000. "On September 11th, we mourned the loss of our fellow Americans with our fellow Americans. Now we face this: There is a lot of fear and worry in the hearts of many Muslims. When we organize events, they do not come out much anymore. They say, 'We're under fire, we're under siege — cool it.'"



Nahas

For example, Nahas says, he counted heads last week during a peaceful interfaith protest of U.S. strategies in Iraq and found he was the only Muslim there among Christians, Jews and people of other faiths. The feeling of somehow being different, or being perceived as different, bothers people like Shameem Ahsan, 42, also of Brighton. He often feels apprehensive, especially in public situations such as airports. "I just keep thinking that, any moment I may be singled out," Ahsan says. "You are always worried, looking over your shoulder. And it is so frustrating."

Like his fellow Muslims, Ahsan just wants to feel American and feel it is his America, too. "We came to America because we wanted liberty," he says. "We came to make this our country, our home. We care about America. We want it to be safe. Our children are here." Adds Salahuddin Malik, who heads the local chapter of the American Muslim Council, fear of involvement because of worries over official or unofficial "profiling" should trouble all Americans, not just Muslims. "Our rights are precious and we must watch them very carefully," Malik says. "If a person is singled out because of what he or she looks like or believes, we are all in trouble."

Those frustrations and feelings apparently are shared by Muslims throughout the United States, of which there are an estimated 7 million. In a survey by the Council on American Islamic Relations in Washington, D.C., 57 percent of American Muslims say they experienced bias or discrimination in the year since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, and nearly nine out of 10 say they know of a fellow Muslim who experienced discrimination.



Malik

Among the other findings: ■ More than three-quarters also experienced kindness or support from friends or colleagues of other faiths. That kindness often took the form of verbal reassurances, support during the anti-Muslim backlash following the attacks and even offers to help protect mosques.



Maryam Razvi

■ 48 percent say their lives changed for the worse in the year following the attacks. ■ Those who say their lives changed for the better (16 percent) cited a much deeper knowledge of Islam made necessary by requests to explain their faith to others and a stronger connection with their faith.

Indeed, the events of Sept. 11, 2001, plunged Maryam Razvi, a 22-year-old Brighton woman, into a study of her faith. She read and reread the Quran and the writings of Islamic scholars — not just to be able to answer non-Muslim friends' questions, but to answer her own.

"I really needed to take a step back and see where my faith really stood," says Razvi, a substitute teacher. "How is it these people, the terrorists, call themselves Muslim? And what I found is that there is absolutely no tolerance in my faith for this. ... My advice to those with questions is pick up a copy of the Quran and read for yourself."

And the questions are many, says 16-year-old Saba Khan of Spencerport. "I get lots of questions about my faith, and I have had some looks, too," she says. "I am not walking around with my eyes closed. I understand people are upset, but there is no excuse to be upset with Muslims. Yes, I am a Muslim. It's not like I support terrorism. If I did, then I wouldn't be a Muslim. We have to educate people."

And that is the key to solving the issue, says Muhammad Shafiq, imam, or spiritual leader, at the Islamic Center of Rochester.

"There is a misconception and misunderstanding of our faith in America, which is at the root of all this," Shafiq says. "People confuse acts of politics with religion, and do not recognize, out of a lack of education, that Islam would not allow this type of behavior."

Muslim leaders have vowed to do their part to reach out and educate, as well as immerse themselves in helping the community. For example, the Islamic Center conducted more than 400 programs on Islam in the last year, and plans more.

At the Rochester Masjid, a mosque on North Street downtown that has mostly African-American members, involvement is a mission. The mosque, where two American flags flap outside in the wind, has won awards and hearts in the neighborhood for its good works, such as forcing out drug dealers and helping the elderly.

In addition, the Council of Mosques, of which the Islamic Center and Rochester Masjid are members, is actively looking for a location to establish a shelter and soup kitchen to help people in need.

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— **ALY NAHAS** of Brighton, a leader in the local Muslim community



JAY CAPERS staff photographer

Kamilah Abdul-Alim, a first-grade teacher at School 30, quiets her class. Abdul-Alim says she herself has not experienced discrimination, but she knows others have. She wants the national media to stop using "Muslim" as a label for terrorists.

A longtime observer of the Muslim community here has been the Rev. J. Paul Womack, co-pastor of Covenant United Methodist Church on Culver Road and chairman of the Inter-faith Forum, on which most major faiths locally are represented.

"I can see that they feel beleaguered," Womack says of area Muslims. "Some of the language that gets used still connects the Islamic world to being the problem. It's not 'Yemenis get arrested' but 'Muslims get arrested.' There are still references to 'The Islamic World' as if there was no diversity. And there is a lot of diversity, just like any group."

Womack is unsure what more Muslims can do or should have to do.

"The Muslims in this community have worked very hard to demonstrate they are very committed to their citizenship," Womack says. "People of other faith traditions or no faith at all need to be open to being educated. We need a better sense of the political, because the issues are not always about religion, but economic and social and political."

Farzana Razvi, Maryam's mother and a substitute teacher at School 30, says she is excited by a new program sponsored by Mayor William A. Johnson Jr. that will team Muslims and non-Muslim partners for the next year. She will pair off with a Hindu woman in hope that a friendship will develop over numerous meetings.

"It is a way of reaching out," she says. "If we can clear up some misunderstandings about Islam, that would be a very great accomplishment."

While Kamilah Abdul-Alim herself has not experienced discrimination, she knows well that others have, especially in places where Muslims are fewer in number. "Generally, Rochester may be a better place for Muslims because of the large number here. I think there is more acceptance," says Abdul-Alim, a Rochester resident who teaches first-graders at School 30.

The national news media, she says, must stop fueling tensions by using "Muslim" as a label for

the Sept. 11 terrorists. Such religious identification is not used, she says, when people raised, for example, as Christians — Timothy McVeigh in the Oklahoma City bombing, for one — commit heinous acts.

What Hanif Abdul-Wahid wants most is for Islam to flower in America.

And Abdul-Wahid, imam at the Rochester Masjid, wants peace — for America, and for his fellow Muslims.

"We are law-abiding, we work very hard, and our expressions of faith are good works," he says. "For many people, those Muslims born in other nations and those whom America has birthed, Islam is the beacon of our hope. And it is part of what America is, too." □

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What Muslims believe

There are an estimated 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, 7 million of whom live in the United States. An estimated 15,000 Muslims live in the Rochester metro area. Islam is an Arabic word meaning "submission" and derives from a word meaning "peace." Islam, founded in the 7th century, is younger than Judaism and Christianity, although it shares some of their historical and scriptural roots. Here are some key Islamic beliefs:

God

There is one God, Allah. The God of the Muslims is the God of creation that Christians and Jews worship. God also created angels to assist the divine purpose.

Prophets

There is a divinely inspired and historical chain of prophets starting with the first human being, Adam, and including Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Job, Moses, Aaron, David, Solomon, Elias, Jonah, John the Baptist and Jesus.

Jesus and Mary

Jesus —whom Christians worship as the Son of God —was one of the greatest of all holy prophets. Like Christians, Muslims believe he will have a Second Coming. A Muslim never refers to him simply as "Jesus," but always adds the phrase "peace be upon peace." The holy scriptures of the faith, the Quran, describes his virgin birth. His mother, Mary, is considered by Muslims as the purest woman in all creation.

Muhammad

Muhammad was God's last prophet. The angel Gabriel delivered the Quran to him. Muhammad was born in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, in the year 570 A.D. and died in 632.

Five pillars of Islam

There are five "Pillars of Islam" necessary for Muslims. They are the shahada or declaration of faith ("There is no god but God and Muhammad is his last prophet and messenger"); prayer at specific periods five times a day; charitable giving; fasting from sunrise to sunset daily during the monthlong festival of Ramadan; and a pilgrimage once in one's lifetime to the holy city of Mecca, if one is financially and physically able.

The afterlife

Muslims believe in an afterlife, and in both heaven and hell.

SOURCES: Islamic Center of Rochester, Islam.org