

DEI Newsletter #1 September 8, 2021

This is the first of a series of newsletters related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion. Over the weekend I was thinking about how to start the series. Ironically, reading the morning paper on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, there was an article I thought perfect to start the series: “Two Decades After 9/11, Muslim Americans still fighting bias”. I did a cut and paste as well as attach it as a file. I hope you will look at this and reflect on the many facets of bias.

## Two decades after 9/11, Muslim Americans still fighting bias

By MARIAM FAM, DEEPTI HAJELA and LUIS ANDRES HENAO September 7, 2021

NEW YORK (AP) — A car passed, the driver’s window rolled down and the man spat an epithet at two little girls wearing their hijabs: “Terrorist!”

It was 2001, mere weeks after the World Trade Center fell, and 10-year-old Shahana Hanif and her younger sister were walking to the local mosque from their Brooklyn home.

As the 20th anniversary of the Sept. 11 terror attacks approaches, Hanif still recalls her confusion over how anyone could look at her, a child, and see a threat.

“It’s not a nice, kind word. It means violence, it means dangerous. It is meant to shock whoever ... is on the receiving end of it,” she says.

But the incident also spurred a determination to speak out for herself and others. She’s become a community organizer and is strongly favored to win a seat on the New York City Council in an upcoming election.

Like Hanif, other young American Muslims have grown up under the shadow of 9/11. Many have faced hostility, suspicion, questions about their faith, doubts over their Americanness.

They’ve also found ways to fight back against bias, to organize, to craft nuanced personal narratives about their identities. In the process, they’ve built bridges and challenged stereotypes.

There is “this sense of being Muslim as a kind of important identity marker, regardless of your relationship with Islam as a faith,” says Eman Abdelhadi, a University of Chicago sociologist.

Mistrust of Muslims didn’t start on 9/11, but it dramatically intensified with the attacks.

America's diverse Muslim communities were foisted into the spotlight, says Youssef Chouhoud, a political scientist at Virginia's Christopher Newport University.

"Your sense of who you were was becoming more formed, not just Muslim but American Muslim," he says. "What distinguished you as an American Muslim? Could you be fully both, or did you have to choose? There was a lot of grappling with what that meant."

In Hanif's case, there was no blueprint.

"Fifth-grader me wasn't naïve or too young to know Muslims are in danger," she wrote in an essay about 9/11's aftermath. "...Flashing an American flag from our first-floor windows didn't make me more American."

A young Hanif gathered neighborhood friends to write a letter to then-President George W. Bush asking for protection.

"We knew," she says, "that we would become like warriors of this community."

But being warriors often carries a price.

Ishaq Pathan, 26, recalls when a boy told him he seemed angry and wondered if Pathan was going to blow up their Connecticut school.

He remembers feeling helpless when taken aside at an airport for additional questioning upon returning to the United States after a college semester in Morocco.

The agent looked through his belongings, including the laptop where he kept a private journal, and started reading it.

"I remember having tears in my eyes. I was completely and utterly powerless," says Pathan.

"You go to school with other people of different backgrounds and you realize ... what the promise of the United States is," he adds. "And when you see it not living up to that promise, then I think it instills in us a sense of wanting to help and fix that."

He now works as the San Francisco Bay Area director for the nonprofit Islamic Networks Group, trying to help younger generations grow confident in their Muslim identity.

Born in Somalia, Shukri Olow fled civil war with her family and lived in Kenyan refugee camps before eventually finding home in a public housing complex in Kent, south of Seattle.

After 9/11, she recalls feeling confused when a teacher in America asked, “What are your people doing?”

Today, she’s seeking a seat on the King County Council.

“There are many young people who have multiple identities who have felt that they don’t belong here, that they are not welcomed here,” she says. “I was one of those young people. And so I try to do what I can to make sure that more of us know that this is our nation, too.”

After 9/11, some American Muslims chose to dispel misconceptions about their faith through personal connections.

Mansoor Shams has traveled across the U.S. with a sign reading: “I’m Muslim and a U.S. Marine, ask anything.” It’s part of the 39-year-old veteran’s efforts to counter hate through dialogue.

In 2019, he spoke to students at Liberty University in Virginia; some still call him with questions about Islam.

“There’s this mutual love and respect,” he says.

Shams wishes his current work wasn’t needed but feels a responsibility to share a counternarrative he says many Americans don’t know.

Ahmed Ali Akbar, 33, came to a different conclusion.

Shortly after 9/11, some adults in his community arranged for an assembly at his school in Saginaw, Michigan, where he and other students talked about Islam and Muslims. But he recalls his confusion at some of the questions: Where is Osama bin Laden? What’s the reason behind the attacks?

That period left him feeling like trying to change people’s minds wasn’t always effective.

Akbar eventually turned his focus toward telling stories about Muslim Americans on his podcast “See Something Say Something.”

“There’s a lot of humor in the Muslim American experience as well,” he says. “It’s not all just sadness and reaction to the violence and...racism and Islamophobia.”

Amirah Ahmed, 17, was born after the attacks and feels she was thrust into a struggle not of her making.

A few years ago at her Virginia school's 9/11 commemoration, she felt students' stares at her and her hijab.

For the next anniversary, she wore her Americanness as a shield, donning an American flag headscarf to address her classmates from a podium.

Ahmed spoke about honoring both the lives of those who died in America on 9/11 and of Iraqis who died in the war launched in 2003. She says it was a "really powerful moment."

But she hopes her future children don't feel the need to prove they belong.

"Our kids are going to be (here) well after the 9/11 era," she says. "They should not have to continue fighting for their identity."