

FASTING FOR THE FAITH: VALLEY'S GROWING MUSLIM COMMUNITY FOLLOWS THE WAY

Publication: THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE

Published: 01/25/1997

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Komal Rashid looks at the letters she's written on the blackboard, then looks at the little tykes she's teaching the Arabic alphabet to.

"Who can say them all for me?" she asks the 4-, 5- and 6-year-olds at the Islamic Center in South Charleston. A hand shoots up. "OK, go for it," Rashid says.

"Who can name all five pillars [of Islam] for me?" she asks, then assists with the answers: 1. There's one God, and Mohammed is the last prophet. 2. Prayer. 3. Charity for the poor. 4. Fasting. 5. Pilgrimage to Mecca.

"What's in heaven?" she asks. "Toys and ice cream," says a little boy. "And all the good stuff," adds Rashid, eldest of three children of Pakistani-born cardiac surgeon Humayun Rashid and his wife Nizish.

It's 5 p.m. Saturday and as Komal, a George Washington High senior with ambitions to become a dentist, concludes her class, men and women scurry to set tables with fruit salad and fruit juice. Muslims have come to break their fast.

When she's not teaching Sunday school - except during Ramadan, classes are at Sunday noon - she studies and goes to malls, movies and an occasional high school ball game. "Oh yeah, I'm a normal child," she says. "I do all that stuff."

Muslims are now observing Ramadan, a month when the faithful fast every day from the false sunrise - one-and-a-half to two hours before the sun comes up - to sunset. At sunset, as one man chants the call to prayer, people eat their fruit salad topped with a date and snack lightly on finger food.

Then they go up to the sanctuary for evening prayer, taking off shoes before going in. Once inside they stand side by side in straight rows. "The concept is that everyone is equal," says Dr. Raheel Khan. Men stand in the front rows and women, a scarf or hejab covering their heads, in the rear.

Fifteen minutes of prayer, and they come back down, go through the buffet line, and sit down to a hearty dinner of both American and ethnic fare.

Because Muslims calculate their holidays on an uncorrected lunar calendar, Ramadan floats freely from one end of the calendar to another over a 30-plus-year period. (Jews calculate their holidays on a corrected lunar calendar, and their holidays oscillate back and forth no more than 30 days. Thus the Jewish New Year always begins somewhere from early September to early October.)

The hardships of Ramadan are greatest in summer, when the fasting day lasts long and the observants, who are not permitted to drink or eat, suffer most.

Fasting makes the faithful understand what the poor go through and cleanses the soul of the trappings of life, explains American-born Murtala Muhammad. A convert to Islam 20 years ago when he was an international vagabond stopping in Ghana, he now works for the Social Security Administration.

"We're a real diverse group," he says. "We're a regular United Nations."

About 500 Muslim families live in West Virginia, estimates Mahmoud Shahbandy, born in Iran, a graduate of West Virginia Tech, and a data manager with the state Bureau of Public Health.

"We live in this community, we're part of this community, we give to this community, but people don't know anything about Islam," says Shahbandy, president of the Islamic Association of West Virginia.

"Islam is not just a religion. It's a way of life," says Shahbandy. "We're a God-fearing people. We wish that everyone in society would have a fear of God. If they did, we wouldn't have all the problems we see around us."

As the Charleston group - West Virginia's largest - has grown, it moved in the 1970s into a converted church in Nitro, then in 1988 into a big new building in South Charleston.

"The moral values that Islam can contribute to society, we are thirsty for," Shahbandy says.

The Islamic community is multi-ethnic. Members include large numbers of families from India and Pakistan and Arab countries, most often Syria and Egypt. There are a smaller number of Jordanians and Palestinians, plus a sprinkling of blacks.

Muslims, Christians and Jews all believe in the same God. Sequentially, Islam and its holy book the Koran rest squarely atop Judaism and Christianity and the scriptures of those religions. Just as Christians see Jesus as the Messiah who completes Judaism, Moslems see Muhammed as the final prophet who completes both Judaism and Christianity.

People who track these things say that by 2015, Islam, boosted by an inflow of converts and immigrants, plus high birth rates, will become the second biggest religion in America. It will surpass Judaism, plagued by low birth rates and high rates of intermarriage.

Most of the larger cities in the state and some smaller ones have Muslim communities, and Islamic centers spring up in converted houses in many such places. Morgantown has a large community. So does Huntington, where the faithful expect to break ground soon for an Islamic Center.

Most people who come to the center are American citizens. Although they observe a different religion and a different sabbath - the Muslim Sabbath runs Thursday sundown to Friday sundown - members say they blend smoothly into the American scene.

Abdul Al-Qutub came here as a young man from the Israeli-occupied West Bank so he could study at West Virginia Tech in Montgomery. "Your readers will laugh at this. I got lost. I went to Montgomery, Alabama."

Now 38, he and his American-born wife Candy live in Kanawha City and run a flower shop, Sensational Tanning and Flowers, in Nitro. Candy has not converted and their children have blended names, Rashida Madeline and Usef Wade. "I have to compromise," he says.