

MUSLIM IN AMERICA

Doctor and family hold on to Islamic roots while chasing the great American dream

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SCOTT DEPOT - Alaa Haffar, 8, plays with her sisters and keeps an eye on the Arabic-language television program.

A minidish in the back yard pulls in 15 Arabic stations, beaming in just now, she explains to a visitor, the Arabic equivalent of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire?"

Alaa, who friends and family call Lulu, chatters with her mom in Arabic and with the visitor in English. "Last Sunday, our teacher [at the Islamic Center] told us, 'We're in Arabic school. We want you to speak Arabic here.'"

Alaa straddles two worlds. As a physician's daughter in the United States, she lives with her parents, an older brother and two younger sisters in a subdivision so new the shrubs are still small. She attends third grade at Scott Depot Elementary School.

But Alaa and her family - her parents immigrated to America as adults - return to Syria every summer to reunite with the extended family and the culture her parents want to hold on to.

"Their vacation is longer than mine," said Dr. Yaser Haffar, 41, the only cardiologist practicing in Putnam County. "I only get two weeks. They stay two months."

He came to America in 1985, a medical school graduate about to begin his residency. Three years later, he returned to Syria to marry the daughter of a family who knew his family. He was acquainted with the woman he was to marry, but didn't know her well.

"It's a whole different system than the dating system," he said. "The family knows everything about the other family. The family plays a big role in getting the couple together."

It was not an arranged marriage, Haffar said. "I made the choice, and she made the choice for herself."

His wife, Huda Haffar, 31, bustles about the kitchen, filling the serving bowls and platters for the meal that ends the daily fast of Ramadan. Ramadan occupies the Muslim lunar calendar's entire ninth month, during which God commands the faithful to abstain from all worldly pleasures - including food, beverage and sex - from dawn to sunset.

Ramadan began in November this year, but over the 33 years of the Islamic lunar calendar, the holiday roams through all 12 months.

The clock reaches 5:11 p.m. The date is Nov. 28. The adults and Allna's brother, age 12, have not eaten since 6:04 a.m., when the first light of dawn cast its soft glow and sunrise was still more than an hour away.

"I think it's time, guys, isn't it?" Dr. Haffar asks.

Eight people come to the table. They say a brief prayer, asking that Allah give them more bounty and protect them from the hellfire. Then they dig in. Some scoop up their food with pieces of flatbread. Others eat with spoons. Soon the spoons go clink-clink against the insides of emptying bowls.

"The food was good," Alaa tells a visitor. "You should have eaten."

"We enjoy this month because it's a month of peace for us," the doctor explains. "We take our worship up to a higher grade. It's actually a month of self-control and self-restraint. It's also a time to strengthen social relationships."

The meal concluded, everyone stands up, goes to the family room, pulls out prayer rugs from a chest, and prays. The doctor leads, facing the turned-off television set, which is also the direction of Mecca. The others form a second line, except for Mrs. Haffar, who, having cleared the table, arrives late and stands in a third line by herself.

The Islamic community continues to grow, the doctor says. Saturday night Ramadan break-fast dinners draw 300 to 400 people to the Islamic Center. Even more people will come for the dinner celebrating the first day after Ramadan, the feast of Eid.

About 600 Muslims live in the Kanawha Valley and about 3,200 in West Virginia, estimated Dirar Ahmad, president of the Islamic Association of West Virginia. Over the last 10 years, the number of Muslims in the Kanawha Valley has doubled.

Muslims have opened mosques in Beckley, Princeton, Huntington and Morgantown since the state's first one opened in South Charleston 14 years ago, Ahmad said. The South Charleston mosque is still the state's biggest, but now needs more classrooms and more space for children and social gatherings. Mosque leaders are looking at an expansion that would include a multipurpose room.

Dr. Haffar has two sisters and a brother who remain in Syria. Another brother is a gastroenterologist in Logan.

"We've not come here to be dependent on anyone else," says the doctor, speaking of the Islamic community, with its abundance of doctors, engineers and businesspeople. "We're taxpayers mostly."

Mrs. Haffar wears a scarf around her head, as she does whenever she goes out or receives nonfamily visitors at home. She does not work outside the home. She does not shake hands with men.

Mrs. Haffar's brothers, 27 and 28, have been living with the family since August. They had been working as lab technicians in Kuwait, where half the work force is non-Kuwaiti. The brothers have come to the United States to strengthen their English at Garnet Career Center.

Two Pakistani families live in the subdivision. Another Pakistani family will move in this month.

Muslims have been on edge since 1995, when suspicion immediately turned to Islamic terrorists after the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City, Dr. Haffar says. "That really bothered us," he says.

Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols were convicted in the bombing. McVeigh was executed earlier this year.

Dr. Haffar hears many reports of threats against Muslims, and some reports of violence, but he has not had any bad experiences himself since Sept. 11.

"But we're always on the alert," he said. "If we feel threatened, we would consider leaving."