

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

We must fight Islamophobia and other forms of prejudice

Kevin McIntosh *Coordinator, Grand Valley State University Campus Interfaith Resources*

Nearly half of all Muslim American families report that they have had a child bullied in school because of their religion. Furthermore, a quarter of those instances of bullying were perpetrated by a teacher or administrator in the school. How sad that these children are learning prejudice at school at such an early age.

These results come from the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank that works to "envision an America where Muslims are thriving and equal." We are excited to have a graduate of Grand Valley State University, Petra Alsoofy, return to tell us more about these efforts to reduce this kind of bullying and prejudice in our communities. She works for the ISPU, where she serves as outreach and partnerships manager. Her event for students and the community will be March 9 at the GVSU Allendale campus.

Alsoofy graduated from GVSU in 2011, and during her student days she made the campus a better place. Along with her sisters, Alsoofy was one of the founding members of our Muslim Student Association, which still is thriving today. She also was one of the first members of GVSU to attend the Interfaith Youth Core's conference and intensive training program sponsored by IFYC and the White House. During the GVSU Kaufman Interfaith Institute's Year of Interfaith Understanding in 2012, Alsoofy served on the planning committee and helped create intercampus connections by meeting with students from Kuyper College in order to create Christian-Muslim dialogue.

After graduation, Alsoofy continued her interests in history, education and interfaith activism. For more than four years, she held the position of educator at the Arab American National Museum and helped coordinate programs with the Smithsonian Museum. She

is on the board of directors for the Michigan Council for History Education and is active with the Religious History Community of the American Association for State and Local History.

In her presentations, Alsoofy will explore how Islamophobia manifests in American society and ways we can combat it. Islamophobia is only one branch of the tree of hatred and bigotry that should have no place in Grand Rapids, or anywhere in America.

How do we create a society where attitudes toward people of various faiths and other differences are positive? According to Eboo Patel, president of the Interfaith Youth Core, we do this by creating positive relationships and accurate knowledge. He named three aspects of the interfaith triangle: attitude, relationships and knowledge. Each part of the triangle can influence the other, so that if one is to focus on building appreciative knowledge or positive relationships, then the positive attitude would also increase.

A lack of relationships can be a big cause of Islamophobia in America. According to Pew Research, only about a third of Americans know a Muslim. This lack of relationships causes distrust and bias toward Muslims. ISPU's Islamophobia index discovered that just know-

ing a single Muslim can cut one's negative perception in half and it is one of their major strategies to reduce Islamophobia in America. Evidence also suggests that building friendships impacts attitudes beyond the two people in the relationship. Having a friend that is different from you builds appreciation for and reduces prejudice toward all cultural groups.

I find hope with this in our college students. In a longitudinal study done by the Interfaith Youth Core, almost half of the students surveyed said they had five or more close friends of various religious, spiritual or secular traditions. The majority of those students come from minority religious groups (Muslim, Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist and atheist). Less than half of students who identified as Christian (evangelical, mainstream Protestant, Mormon or Catholic) said they had more than five friends who were of other traditions.

In addition to having a friend, knowing more about Islam helps combat Islamophobia. According to the ISPU report, "Knowing something about Islam is even more powerful a predictor of tolerance toward Muslims than knowing a Muslim personally." They go on to suggest that knowing one person could be dis-

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missed as an exception, "one of the good ones." More extensive knowledge of the faith puts one's experience into a larger context. Sadly, however, religious literacy among Americans is not that great.

Last summer, Pew Research put out a new report on how much Americans know about religion. Almost 11,000 adults representing a religiously diverse section of America took the quiz. The researchers found that Americans knew a lot about Christianity, and a little about atheists/agnostics, but knew little to nothing about Judaism, Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism. One of the biggest issues of religious illiteracy is that it causes distrust among the public. Religious literacy allows us to dispel stereotypes and get to a deeper place of mutual understanding, and thus work together more effectively for the civic good.

Alsoofy's work identifies similarities between Islamophobia and other forms of

bigotry and hatred. Sometimes, doing social justice work feels like battling the Greek monster Hydra. Each time you cut off a head, two new ones pop up. As we focus on dismantling Islamophobia, white supremacy or antisemitism might also appear.

Deborah Lipstadt, historian of the Holocaust, compares hatred to a fire, writing "like a fire set by an arsonist, passionate hatred and conspiratorial worldviews reach well beyond their intended target."

Whether you think of it as a blazing fire or a multi-headed snake monster, hate and "isms" spread further and impact all of us.

One of the best ways to combat Islamophobia or any type of discrimination is to stand up and speak out against all forms of hatred and discrimination. Please join us as we explore these issues on the Allendale campus at our winter Interfaith Leadership Lecture.

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Kevin McIntosh is coordinator of Interfaith Resources at GVSU.



Petra Alsoofy is a Grand Valley State University alumna.

If you go

What: Interfaith Leadership Lecture with Petra Alsoofy

When: 4:30 p.m. March 9

Where: Kirkhof Center, GVSU Allendale Campus

Information and parking permits at: InterfaithUnderstanding.org