

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

New faces in the Muslim community include emerging leaders

By Douglas Kindschi

Director of the Kaufman Interfaith Institute, GVSU

This past Labor Day weekend, it was my privilege to join a group of Jewish and Christian seminary students who were invited to attend the annual convention of the Islamic Society of North America.

This year's convention of the largest Islamic organization in North America brought 20,000 Muslims to Chicago, along with the 24 seminary students who have, for the second year, been guests of the organization.

We again were inspired by the stories of everyday, as well as heroic, Muslims who contribute to society and yet suffer from increasing prejudice against them.

We heard from Mohamed Soltan, a 27-year-old American citizen, who had spent nearly

two years in an Egyptian prison because of his protest against injustice in that country.

He engaged in a 400-day



Kindschi

hunger strike, but emerged convinced that the youth of that country will prevail as they seek the kind of freedom we enjoy here in America.

He says that it is a generational issue and that "the future is ours."

Suzanne Barakat, a young medical doctor from San Francisco, talked of the pain her family suffered after hearing about the murder of her brother, a dental student at the University of North Carolina.

Deah Barakat and his new wife of one month, along with her sister, had been gunned down.

In addition to being moved by her retelling of this tragic story, I was stunned that she could affirm that goodness has come from this terrible event.

Her brother and his new wife, also a dental student, had been trying to raise \$20,000 for a dental project for the people of Syria. Dr. Barakat told us how the family chose to be proactive and transform this tragedy into something good. They picked up the project that has now raised over a half-million dollars for the effort.

In spite of the discrimination and violence she and her family have experienced, she could still affirm that she was proud to be American and Muslim.

We also learned about Faatimah Knight, a 23-year-old college student, who responded following the eight black churches that had been burned after the

tragedy at Charleston's Emanuel AME church. She started a campaign among Muslims that has raised over \$100,000 to help rebuild these churches.

Najah Bazy is a transcultural clinical nurse specialist from Detroit and CEO of Diversity Specialists and Transcultural Health Care Solutions.

She is also active in programs providing refugee support, a mobile food pantry and clean water initiatives. She has committed her life to the service of others no matter their ethnic or religious background.

The 2011 Nobel Peace Prize winner, Tawakkol Karman, told of her human-rights efforts in Yemen where she became the face of the protests. She was the first Arab woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize and, at the time, the youngest.

As a co-founder of the press

rights organization, Women Journalists Without Chains, she has led protests against government control of the press as well as issues from child marriage to the use of drones.

Upon receiving the Peace award, she said it was a "victory of our peaceful revolution. I am so happy, and I give this award to all of the youth and all of the women across the Arab world. ... We cannot build our country or any country in the world without peace."

The seminary students and I were impressed with these memorable sessions featuring young people who are emerging leaders in the Muslim community.

These strong men and women are showing all of us that there is hope as new faces emerge, telling their stories and setting forth a vision for the future.

Email: interfaith@gvsu.edu