

Hartford Public Library Features Muslim Women Speakers

by Douglas Lord

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Describes a program called "Muslim Immigrant Women's Voices" co-sponsored by the Library and the Hartford Public Schools' Bilingual/Bicultural Department.

How did the Hartford Public Library get 43 people to attend a mid-day program on Muslim Immigrant Women's Voices? "Well," says the library's Information Services Center manager Sandy Gamzon, "Homa is on the phone constantly." She refers to the library's Manager of Multicultural Education and Outreach Homa Naficy and places a strong emphasis on the word 'constantly.' "This," Gamzon gestures to the crowd, "does not happen with a flyer or a note on the website."

Most of the 43 attendees are women, and there are as many wearing Laura Ashley as there are in head scarves. Before the program, everyone mills about the Hartford Collection room on the library's third floor. Sunlight streams through windows showing a cheery blue sky, materials from the collection on Islam are on display, and there's tea and biscuits.

The program, called '*Muslim Immigrant Women's Voices*,' is co-sponsored by the library and Hartford Public Schools' Bilingual/Bicultural Department and features four terrifically talented speakers. Sarah Aziz, a North Haven Muslim media and political activist, seeks to "shape discourse" and have Muslims speak for themselves as opposed to having others make assumptions about them; Aziz is keenly interested in local politics and civic involvement. Rabia Chaudry, an attorney and Vice President of the Muslim Coalition of Connecticut (MCCT), is an immigration lawyer working in Hartford, though her roots are in small town Kansas and in Pennsylvania's Amish country. Aida Mansoor, completing her Muslim Chaplaincy training at the Hartford Seminary, came to the area when her husband, a physician who founded the MCCT, was offered a position at the Hartford Hospital. Dzenana Mujkic, a professional student, is from the Bosnian-American Islamic Cultural Center where her husband is Imam.



Though all the speakers are technically 'immigrants,' some were raised pretty much 'American;' the information they share proves fascinating, with each bringing a singular, personal presence to the program.



While each is unique, all the panelists seem to agree that practicing Islam in the USA is a much purer experience than in many other places they have been, possibly because the US lacks

a distinct Muslim culture and is instead focused on worship and prayer.

Ms. Aziz, to the agreement of all the panelists, notes that she finds herself correcting a lot of 'JPI' (a.k.a. Just Plain Ignorance), and is especially careful when explaining those terms, like 'Allah' and 'jihad,' most often depicted inaccurately in American culture.

Folks in the audience relax with tea and learn about a variety of things with the help of today's facilitator, Janet L Bauer, Associate Professor of International Studies at Trinity College. Five-a-day prayers are revealed to be a wonderful spiritual bonding experience for these women, folks are given an insider view of the Dutch Jyllands-Posten Muhammad cartoons controversy, and Ms. Aziz notes the cultural implications of the astoundingly high illiteracy rate in post-colonial Muslim cultures.



Each panelist talks a bit about questions they are most frequently asked by non-Muslims; most concern hijab, an Arabic term denoting a sense of cover, privacy or shelter. Hijab carries a broad, symbolic presence in Islam, yet is also a very individualized decision on the part of wearers. Three of today's speakers wears a head scarf (often incorrectly termed a 'hijab'), and each speaks about what 'covering' means to them individually and culturally. Though reasons for covering vary from culture to culture and woman to woman, Ms. Chaudry spoke for the group when she said that "It's my choice and it's a spiritual decision." Chaudry also conveyed the stigma associated practicing Islam within a larger culture when she said she "feels invisible when she wears the hijab." Chaudry added that "There's a lot of misinformation out there," which affects how many Americans view her. As Ms. Mujkic aptly put it, "If you want to be my friend it doesn't matter if I wear a scarf or not."



Ms. Mansoor opined, and the others agreed, that fighting JPI and misinformation is best accomplished with programs like this one, featuring speakers, and informational bureaus. The group also recommends taking media coverage with a healthy grain of salt.

Of course, with the program being held in a library, books came up, too. Recommended titles included *In the Footsteps of the Prophet* as well as *The Koran for Dummies* by Sohaib Sultan, who happens to be the Muslim Chaplain at Trinity College & Yale University.