

Today I Met Women Who Wear Hijabs

My Introduction to Fullerton's Muslim Women

by Ellen Ahn

I am a Korean-American immigrant mom living in Sunny Hills and I faithfully attend Fullerton Presbyterian Church. Last Sunday, however, I found myself in a mosque listening to local Muslim women.

Organized by the OC Human Relations Commission, I was participating in listening sessions to learn what life is like today for some of those who were singled out for attack in the weeks following September 11, 2001. I currently serve as an OC Human Relations

Commissioner and am sharing this experience as part of a commitment to make Orange County a better place for all people.

Though the Islamic Institute of Orange County, located just south of CSUF, is only a few miles across town from my home, the minaret topped building felt a world away. Like most Americans, I have never stepped inside a mosque and in my personal daily life, I rarely meet Muslims. Were my sleeves long enough? Do I sit or stand? Is this or that a faux pas? - these were thoughts racing through my mind as I watched a prayer service and joined in discussion with a group of Muslim women.

I quietly listened to a Muslim teenager share stories of bullying and being subjected to mean taunts about her scarf (hijab) at school. The word "hijab" refers to both the head covering traditionally worn by Muslim women and to the mod-

est Muslim styles of dress in general. I saw her wrestling with the question of how to personally navigate prejudice. In her, I saw my own teenager and the teenagers of so many others, struggling to define their identities and combat insensitivity in a diverse community.

Another girl stated that she deals with prejudice by overcompensating at school, treating others more kindly and sensitively to show that Muslims are not terrorists. I met a mother who worried about how her two autistic children will cope with rude comments.

I wondered if her story was like my mother's - of war and struggle, of immigration, of acculturation - a story of survival.

I reacted as any mother would, with indignation at why innocent children should be subjected to circumstances that they cannot control. I felt protective of these children as if they were my own.

I listened to young women in their twenties who clearly had thought through the events of 9/11 and its aftermath. One stated that "we have our lives, but we are careful." Another young woman said that she worries about her safety because she lives alone and wears a veil. She said she had no intention of changing her ways.

I met women who were secure in their identity, yet practical in their daily lives. I observed mothers who reacted to their daughters' stories by telling them to hold their tongues and to respond peacefully - so as not to put themselves in harm's way. I met a mother telling another to warn her



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Above: OC Human Relations Listening Session Participants: Nadia Hassan from the Anaheim Mosque (Islamic Institute of Orange County) on State College and the 91 Freeway), and OC Human Rights Commissioners Ellen Ahn, and Nadia Saad Bettendorf.

PHOTO BY ELLI REINA

daughter to always walk in groups. Amidst nationwide discussions of anti-Islamic sentiment and anti-terrorism, I met ordinary mothers who worried foremost about the safety and well-being of their children.

Although she spoke little, next to me sat a grandmother whose wrinkles and smiles spoke a million words. I wondered if her story was like my mother's - of war and

struggle, of immigration and acculturation - a story of survival. She had a presence of wisdom only available to those who have seen it all.

Our conversation ended later than the men's group. I chuckled at the thought of how women in groups, regardless of religion or nationality, are just more talkative. The session ended with a woman stating that the one positive aspect of 9/11



was that the world was now more aware of a Muslim presence in our communities. She was speaking directly to me. I have passed, without saying a word, countless women wearing hijabs, but 9/11 was the event that brought me here today to meet these women.

Today, I did not just meet nameless Muslim women wearing hijabs. Today, I met teenagers and children that are very much like my own. I met confident young women who make me hopeful for this world I live in. I met mothers I would be honored to have as friends. After a while, I no longer noticed their hijabs. Today, I met some very amazing and interesting individuals who are my neighbors.

For more information go to:
www.ochumanrelations.org

At Left:

In foreground the Women's Listening Session with OC Human Relations Commissioners Nadia Saad and Ellen Alm (without hijabs) and members of the Anabem Mosque.

The men's Listening Group is pictured at back with Mosque members and OC Human Relations Executive Director Rusty Kennedy. PHOTO BY AZIZAN