

Chicago area's Muslim youth fight stereotypes, suspicion

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Aasiyah Bhajji knew the boys in her class were just clowning around, but their words stung just the same. As they headed inside from an ultimate Frisbee game at Springman Middle School in Glenview, one of them wrapped his team's colors around his head like a turban.

"Are you trying to go Muslim style, terrorist style?" his buddy asked. Aasiyah's stomach burned. "Stop it," she snapped.

"You can't tell me he doesn't look like Osama bin Laden," the kid shot back, Aasiyah would later recall. She explained to a friend later why she took offense, even though the boys hadn't directly insulted her.

"My religion is me," Aasiyah said.

Aasiyah, 13, and her peers weren't alive for the Sept. 11 attacks on the U.S. Her 16-year-old sister, Saarah, was an infant at the time. But both Glenview teenagers have grown up beneath a cloud of suspicion about their faith. Classmates come to school repeating what they've heard at home or amplify tropes on social media that liken all Muslims to murderers.

During his first visit to an American mosque as president, in Baltimore, on Wednesday, Barack Obama lamented the pain that divisive language on the presidential campaign trail has caused for America's youth. Though religious literacy, cultural awareness and sensitivity have evolved since 2001, political rhetoric and the rise of Islamic State have sparked a new wave of Islamophobia that plays out either in the form of bullying or passive-aggressive comments directed at no one in particular but overheard by those they hurt.

"People don't realize you're Muslim, so they think they can make all kinds of remarks without people judging them," said Aasiyah, who doesn't wear a head scarf.

As a result, some teachers, counselors and school administrators have stepped up to stop bullying before it starts.

Shortly after the Paris terrorist attacks Nov. 13 that killed 130 people, Saarah Bhajji's French teacher at Glenbrook South High School broke out in English, usually forbidden inside his classroom. He didn't want anyone to miss what he had to say on Saarah's behalf.

"How could you think what's going on in Paris and what's going on with ISIS is representative of Islam if you have people like Saarah?" she recalls the teacher, Matt Bertke saying, using a popular acronym for Islamic State. "I didn't have to get up to say it. He did it. I got lucky."

Bertke said he simply could not stay silent. He felt obligated to set an example amid the political invective churning in the 24-hour news cycle and the careless remarks that go viral on Facebook and Twitter.

"Respect — that's the most valuable lesson we could possibly teach," Bertke said in an interview. "On all of these social media, it's so easy to see the hatred out there in the world."

For Mohsin Waraich, 18, a Muslim and a senior at New Trier High School, one of his worst confrontations unfolded on Facebook. When a player on his former park district basketball team posted anti-Muslim messages, Waraich wrote a friendly private message to the boy to correct his misunderstanding of the faith. The former teammate ignored it, and his anti-Muslim posts continued, including that Muslims get offended by cartoons and not beheadings.

"I laughed a little that people are this blinded and not educated about it," Waraich said. "Some kids just want to hear what they're thinking, and some actually want to know."

Waraich isn't afraid to face down people who unfairly tarnish his faith or misrepresent it. He also isn't afraid to fast for Ramadan during football season or take a break from video games at a friend's house to go pray. When New Trier hosted a diversity day for students on the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday, he did two presentations about Islam.

But for American Muslim teens, learning how to balance their multifaceted identity can be a challenge.

"For every child, identity is really important: 'Who am I? Where do I fit in?'" said Aliyah Bannister, 28, a Muslim guidance counselor at the Islamic Foundation School in Villa Park. "But Muslim kids have to deal with that crisis of identity along with 'What's my ethnic identity? How does that fit in? How does being an American fit in? How does being a Muslim fit in?' You have to resolve all these issues as a youth when you're already feeling that all you want is to blend in."

Najma Adam, a Muslim clinical social worker in Northfield, said the negative encounters, if not addressed, can have a detrimental effect. But they also can strengthen a child's coping mechanisms.

As a mental health professional, Adam said she encourages introspection. So while some young Muslims choose to distance themselves from their faith to avoid conflicts with classmates, she has seen the negative attention empower others to learn precisely what their faith teaches and embrace it.

"(In Islam) to know yourself is to know God," she said. "It's not just a mental health pursuit or a worldly pursuit — it's also a spiritual pursuit.

"This idea of Islamophobia is in some ways building the spiritual character of people," she continued. "Now, for the first time, they're saying 'What does that mean?' That's a good struggle to have."

Hiyam Abusumayah, 15, a Muslim and a freshman at Tinley Park High School, said she considered wearing a hijab in sixth grade but decided then that she wasn't ready. Shortly after the Dec. 2 San Bernardino, Calif., shootings that left 14 dead, a boy in her gym class invited her to join his friends' fight against Islamic State.

When she asked him if he knew what Islamic State was, he said, "it's a bunch of your people, a bunch of towel-headed people."

"It made me realize there are a lot of ignorant people out there, and they're not afraid to come up to you and say something like that," she said.

She doesn't know where she found the composure but told him calmly that it was called a hijab, not a towel, and that her mother wears one. In 2009, shortly after an Army major who is Muslim went on a shooting rampage in Fort Hood, Texas, Hiyam's mother, Amal Abusumayah was approached in a grocery store checkout line by a woman who pulled her headscarf. The woman was charged with a hate crime.

Knowing that future acts of terror could spark new waves of wariness, Amal Abusumayah has been working with officials at Tinley Park District 146 to develop a cultural sensitivity program for teachers and students.

"Some of these students being labeled as terrorists don't even know what terrorist means," Amal Abusumayah said. "They're just trying to complete their day at school or they're getting prepared for a math test or they're thinking about a soccer game they're going to go play. We need to be careful about what is said around other students."

In a poll released by the Pew Research Center the same day Obama spoke at the Baltimore mosque, nearly half of Americans said they thought at least some U.S. Muslims are anti-American. Two-thirds of Americans said people, not religious teachings, are to blame when violence is committed in the name of faith. However, when respondents were asked which religion they consider troubling, Islam was the most common answer.

Abusumayah said she urges her children to ask others who make anti-Muslim remarks why they have these ideas.

"There always has to be a positive coming out of this," she said. "When you see somebody hating on you or trying to bully you for something, it's because they're uneducated and they need answers, and this is their way of dealing with it."

Bannister said she encourages kids to develop a repertoire of snappy retorts that don't get them in trouble and leave bullies scratching their heads.

"With kids it's kind of like a jungle," she said. "You have to show the other children you're not one to be messed with. Bullies go after the kids who are weak and not going to say anything back."

She counsels Muslim parents to prepare their children for the potential of being bullied, and to ensure they know the blame belongs to the bully, not them. Denying the problem or avoiding the issue won't prevent others from confronting their children.

Hiyam is still nervous about wearing the hijab, especially given what happened to her mother. But she plans to give it another try this summer.

"When you wear the hijab, everyone knows you're a Muslim," she said. "They're going to pay more attention to you because you stand out and you're different. I want to stand out and I want to be different. If they think Islam is horrible, I want them to come up to me and ask me about it. I want everyone to know that Islam isn't terrorists."