

'We're trying our best'

Not radical. Not extreme. Not hateful. Not violent. Just Muslim.

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PART TWO Local Islamic community strong in midst of tragedy, media misrepresentation

This is an excerpt from a three-part news feature package on the local Coppell Muslim community. Read the series in its entirety online at CoppellStudentMedia.com.

As an internationally-renown mosque, the Valley Ranch Islamic Center (VRIC) is led by some of the country's most influential Islamic speakers, such as imams Yasir Birjas Issa and Omar Suleiman, who collectively boast a social media following of over 1.5 million and regularly travel the country to speak at events. In fact, Suleiman, who was unavailable for an interview, had flown to New Zealand to be with grieving families of Christchurch victims at the time.

The VRIC serves approximately 2,000 Muslims from all across the Dallas-Fort Worth metropolx, which, in having the fourth largest Islamic population in the US, has been described as the "Madinah of America."

This reputable mosque is also located in a former public library.

"When people come visit us, they expect this massive building, but we're small and humble," VRIC administrator Nye Armstrong said. "I like to think it keeps us light on our feet, so we can grow with our community."

Although Muslims only make up about 1.1 percent of the total U.S. population, they are projected to become the second-largest religion group by 2040 after only Christianity, an upward trend that is being mirrored locally.

In the nine years since Issa joined as an imam for the center, growth in membership has soared. Where weekly prayers were once attended by 200 - 250 people, the mosque must now hold two separate prayers to accommodate for the 1,000 - 1,500 people who attend today. In addition to this, lectures are live streamed for those looking to tune in across the world.

"It's not about size, but impact," Issa said. "When I travel, people will say, 'finally, I'm meeting you in person, I've watched you online' so it's definitely very interesting to see we've created a family beyond the geographical location."

To further accommodate the center's rapidly expanding membership, it will be relocating to a larger building in May, when construction is predicted to finish.

Armstrong, who met Issa when he was speaking in New Jersey, initially sought him out for his personal counseling services. It was through this relationship that she first began conducting research on the Muslim community Issa led in Dallas, and discovered what she considered to be the most 'active and inclusive' Islamic group in the nation.

"I came [to Dallas] and visited, and that visit turned into a need to be in the community," Armstrong said. "I moved specifically here to be part of this masjid, for the atmosphere, the peace, the sense of community."

Despite the humble space VRIC occupies, Armstrong credits its extensive programming and its progressive ideals, both thanks to Issa's leadership as imam, for its attractiveness and formidable draw.

"Very progressive and feminist thoughts came out of this man [Issa]," Armstrong said. "I started paying attention. When you have somebody, like an imam, that really targets the women in the community, makes sure they are given free reign of the masjid and have programs designated for them and their children, it benefits the entire community."

Armstrong, who loves to paint, hikes and camps frequently and is 'no less insane' than prior to her conversion to Islam, affirms that negative stereotypes of oppressed Muslim women simply aren't always true - and they have absolutely no place at the VRIC.

On March 20, an evening program was held at the mosque in response to the Christchurch shooting.

A panel of invited speakers were present to provide attendees with insight, advice, information and spiritual guidance in light of the tragedy.

"The perpetrator [of the shooting] wanted us to be scared," said PeacefulYou Counseling founder and primary therapist Usman Mughni. Mughni was one of several invited speakers. "And yet, here we are tonight filling the masjid, showing that we're not scared, but rather, that this will only increase us in faith."

As a personal therapist specializing in Muslim clients, Mughni frequently helps clients suffering from Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD). In his lecture, Mughni shared he has worked with some clients who are afraid to go out to public places, even mosques.

"In traditional cognitive behavioral therapy, you teach them, 'Listen, what are the chances of that happening?'" Mughni said. "But as more of these attacks happen, do I stop telling them this is an irrational fear? That really broke my heart to think that."

Other notable speakers included Perspective Strategic Solutions consultant Fuad Dadabhyo, Homeland Security Advisory Council (HSAC) adviser Mohammed Elbriary, and imam Issa himself.

Points of discussion included a political analysis on the islamophobic rhetoric and discrimination that fueled the attack, how parents should address the shooting with their children, updated security measures for the VRIC and spiritual wisdom on how to cope in light of a world that is becoming increasingly hostile and dangerous for Muslims to occupy.

Security for the mosque stood at the forefront of many attendees' concerns.

In addition to working with the Irving Police Department to ensure city officers will be present at various points during the week, the VRIC is looking to utilize a volunteer system, wherein members of the mosque have undertaken extensive training with law enforcement professionals to receive their firearms license from the state of Texas.

These volunteers will stand guard outside the mosque on a daily basis.

"The reality is, unfortunately, we all grew up believing our places of worship were safe spaces, but we live in a time now where that's no longer the case," Elbriary said.

Above all, the program emphasized the importance of combating negative stereotypes, rising above hatred and upholding the true values of Islam.

"We're trying our best to represent Islam in the purest way we can, the way it should be represented," Issa said. "We have to combat the media and negative representation, politicians who try to cash in on islamophobia."

CHS senior Katie Walker, who cites religion as being a 'fundamental' part of her life, echoes a similar sentiment, citing a famous quote from Indian civil rights activist Mahatma Gandhi to make her point: "I like your Christ, I do not like your Christians. Your Christians are so unlike your Christ."

"The few radical Islamists are taking the religion out of context," Walker said.

In fact, context just might be what is needed most to help prevent future tragedies from unfolding. Separating Islam - a religion that not only tolerates, but explicitly preaches non-violence and men and women as being 'spiritual equals' - from those who are interpreting it as a crucial step toward dispelling harmful stereotypes.

"There's a big difference between the message of Islam,

and the messengers of Islam," Issa said. "The people are people like every other culture; there's the good and the bad and the ugly. It's not fair to judge the faith [of Islam] on the basis of the practice of Muslims."

Extremist adherents who engage in violence - such as the Taliban - simply do not represent tenets of the faith they claim to be killing in the name of.

"My goal is to create a role model community for Muslims in the Dallas area," Issa said. "We're doing our best to represent Islam from the actual text and teachings of the prophet Muhammad himself."

Being a 'role model' not only encompasses abiding by official Islamic doctrine, but retaining the ability to adapt and accommodate the needs of a modern and rapidly westernizing community.

The VRIC is decisively young, full of working professionals and families. Plenty are immigrants who come from traditional roots - but there are just as many members

who are American-born citizens, raised in the midst of anti-Islam rhetoric and an American culture of radical individualism that challenges the importance traditional Muslim groups place on community.

Rather than viewing this as a negative, Issa has embraced the unique duality of his community, incorporating it into VRIC's culture of acceptance of hospitality - both spiritually and visually.

"Our logo is very colorful and modern, because we wanted to break away from traditional designs," Issa said.

The logo is minimalist and sleek, featuring symbolic multi-color petals that twine together to form the image of a mandala.

The VRIC has opened its doors to globalization, modernization and American culture. In turn, it hopes the rest of the world will return the favor.

"We're trying our best," Issa said. "I hope people understand that we're just like everybody else."

PART THREE Young Muslim Americans today straddle cultural divides, balance lifestyles

CHS senior Farris Ali does not pray five times a day, as is traditionally custom, but he does visit the Irving Islamic Center every Friday and strives to pray at least once or twice daily. He practices Ramadan, but doesn't adhere to the belief that drinking or sex before marriage is wrong.

"My parents were born in Pakistan, in an environment where everyone was Muslim," Ali said. "But for me, it's a mix of traditional and western lifestyle."

As Ali puts it, living in the U.S. means there are 'things you're drawn to'.

"In Islam, you're not supposed to drink or have sex before marriage," Ali said. "In America, though, those things are just there. People are more drawn to those activities. You kind of forget about your religion here, compared to if you were in one of those Islamic countries."

The world is smaller than ever, and Ali, who is the first of his family to be born and raised in the U.S., faces one of the most profound effects of this twenty-first century phenomenon.

As globalization brings the world's myriad of cultures closer together, many first and second-generation Americans find themselves falling between cultural checkboxes and straddling hemispheres. Particularly in the West, where materialism is perceived to encourage vanity in American youth culture, "forgetting" your roots, as Ali puts it, can be unavoidable.

This balancing act of assimilation and holding onto one's heritage, already challenging to navigate, can be further intensified when the heritage that is being held onto is facing global backlash and prejudice.

"Our kids are growing up with a very distorted image of Islamic Muslims right now," Issa said. "It's no longer 'cool' to be Muslim. They don't have the same understanding of their identity as their parents do."

The media is one beast - the real-life prejudice and stereotyping Muslim Americans face on a day-to-day basis is another entirely.

"People will make jokes, like they'll shout 'Allahu Akbar', or things related to terrorism and explosives," Ali said. "It sort of bothers me, but people will always be like this. It happens on the daily, and this is the world we live in."

For some Muslim Americans, it is common to keep quiet about the subject matter as a whole.

"Most people don't know I'm Muslim," CHS senior Neha Lalani said. "I don't go around publicizing it, and physically, it's not out there - but if you ask me, I'll tell you."

Neha and her sister, CHS graduate Sana Lalani, are Shia

Ismaili Muslims. Ismailism is a distinctive sect of Islam characterized by modernized interpretations of the Quran and more 'lax' practices. Women are not required to wear hijabs, and contrary to traditional Muslim practices, dressing moderately and praying separately from men is not necessary.

"We've taken in teachings based on society today," Sana said. "For example, you can now marry a non-Muslim according to our doctrine. Before, you couldn't even take [non-Muslims] into the mosque. Our religion adapts according to changes in the world."

The nature of the Lalani sisters' religion simultaneously sets them apart from stereotypical depictions of Muslims and allows them to blend in with the rest of western society.

However, this ability to remain religiously incognito doesn't mean they are intentionally hiding. In spite of the rhetoric they have grown up hearing about Muslims - and indirectly, about themselves - shame and guilt, they emphasize, have no place in their relationship with Islam.

For Sana, her religious community provides not only a source of spiritual guidance, but long-lasting relationships and a point of instant connection.

"All of my childhood friends whom I grew up with and still talk to this day, I met through the Ismaili Center that we've attended since birth," Sana said.

Neha agrees, additionally citing faith as a cultural anchor for families who have immigrated to the U.S.

"We all either came from India or Pakistan, so our parents are usually friends," Neha said. "The values we hold are all the same. When you go through high school, your friends change when you join different cliques, but with my friends from the Ismaili Center, they've been constant."

Community is a significant aspect of Islam. For the VRIC, nurturing a strong sense of unity among Muslims in the area is crucial toward combating the distorted portrayals of their own faith by the media and public.

"The more a community is woven together, the stronger we all are," Armstrong said.

That being said, staying together does not mean staying away from the rest of the world. Rather, it means taking the best out of both western and Islamic culture.

WANT TO READ MORE?

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PART ONE Standing in the wake of devastation



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YASIR BIRJAS ISSA
VRIC Imam