

In a time of uncertainty, Cincinnati Muslims focus on reaching out and speaking up

[Sarah Walsh](#)

6:00 AM, Feb 27, 2017



Shakila Ahmad gave the first tour of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati in 1995. Now, as its president, she works to make Muslim voices heard and understood in Cincinnati -- and to stand up for other religious communities in need.

WEST CHESTER TOWNSHIP, Ohio -- Educating Greater Cincinnati about Islam isn't a new mission for Shakila Ahmad: She's been doing it for more than 20 years.

But today, she said, it's a more important mission than ever.

"We tend to have fear of one another," said Ahmad, who became president of the [Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati](#) in 2014. "We tend to make gross generalizations about one another, particularly when we don't know the other, when in reality we have far more in common than we do different."

That's been the case for as long as Ahmad's been with the center, but she said it became especially apparent last year. Ahmed and her colleagues said Islamophobia -- a fear of and discrimination against Muslims -- entered the mainstream during the recent presidential election.

President Donald Trump claimed at various times during his campaign [he had seen thousands of Muslims celebrating the terrorist attacks on 9/11](#), that he would call for a "[total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States](#)" and that he would [establish a national registry of Muslim Americans](#). Around the same time, FBI statistics [reported](#) a 67 percent surge in hate crimes against Muslims.

Considering the reality of Trump's presidency and the national rise of anti-Muslim rhetoric, Ahmad said she feels her community is faced with a choice.

"When people are talking bad about you, when they're saying nasty, untrue things about you, there are two things you can do," she said. "You can either go crawl under a rock because you're so hurt and so upset, or you can stand up and speak for yourself."

Ahmad has chosen to speak -- and hundreds of people have chosen to listen.

'What about those other Muslims?'

The Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati serves a community of about 35,000 worshippers in a wide variety of capacities, according to its 2015 Muslim Community Needs Survey Report. [Imam](#) Shaikh Musa leads prayer services five times each day at the mosque, and about 200 students attend K-8 classes at El-Sewedy International Academy of Cincinnati. Many more parishioners participate in community programs like an interfaith youth basketball league established with the help of [Crossroads](#) Christian church.



Imam Shaikh Hossam Musa answers visitor questions about Muslims' religious beliefs and how they pray. Photo by Sarah Walsh.

Although Ahmad's schedule is busier than ever -- in addition to her role as board president, she also helps run a medical practice with her husband -- she still lives her commitment to outreach by leading weekday tours of the center for non-Muslim visitors and leaders.

These tours include a walkthrough of the facility, an [explanation of Islam's five pillars](#) and a question-and-answer session at the end. According to Ahmad, there are some questions that surface fairly frequently.

"People say to me, you know, 'We like you. We know you're OK. But what about those other Muslims?'" she said.

"Those other Muslims," in this case, are those who commit violence in the name of the Islamic State and other foreign terrorist groups.

Ahmad knows as little about the inner workings of the Islamic State group as any other person in Ohio, but that question is one American Muslims are increasingly called upon to address, and it carries thousands of smaller questions within it.

Shabana Ahmed is in charge of answering it.

She does it with a smile, for the most part. Ahmed, who leads tours and talks at the Islamic Center, is a critical component of its largest outreach program: Know Your Neighbor.

One Saturday each month, she and Imam Shaikh Hossam Musa lead a group of a few hundred visitors from other local organizations and faith groups through the center to teach them about Islam and answer questions -- including ones that might be uncomfortable.

Like Ahmad, Ahmed embraces awkwardness in the name of greater understanding. She said she knows people who don't personally interact with Muslims are likely to have absorbed a negative image from news and politics, and many of the visitors she meets will have questions about women's rights, violence and terrorism.

Some of them she can answer easily. The misogynistic restrictions on women in nations such as Saudi Arabia, for example, emerge from cultural mores and the actions of people in power, not from widely accepted tenets of Islam, she said.

"Nowhere in Islam does it say that a woman cannot drive. That's ridiculous. They didn't have cars back then," Ahmed said. "I have a feeling that if (the Saudi Arabian government) let their women drive, they'd probably drive themselves out of the country, so that might be where that comes from."



Shabana Ahmed teaches visitors about Islam during a Saturday afternoon Know Your Neighbor session. Photo by Sarah Walsh.

Other questions are more sobering. Why does the Islamic State group advocate violence and suicide in the name of faith? Why has al-Qaida insisted a true Muslim lifestyle includes depriving women of education and personal autonomy? How could a person like Osama bin Laden consider himself a Muslim while ordering thousands of deaths?

"I always tell them this answer: I don't know," she said. "It's like asking, 'Why did Hitler do what he did?' Why is it that, when we have groups like this that say they're Muslim, people connect it back to this religion called Islam? Almost nowhere else do you connect a person's horrible act to the religion that he follows."

Christianity is a beautiful religion, Ahmed said. She said it would be foolish and unfair to hold the majority of Christians responsible for the actions of Dylann Roof, who murdered nine worshippers in a Charleston, South Carolina, church, or Anders Breivik, a Swedish terrorist who killed 77 people in the name of Christian nationalism.

Likewise, she said, it would be equally foolish and unfair to hold the majority of Muslims responsible for the actions of men like bin Laden or Omar Mateen, who killed 49 people in a June 2016 shooting at the gay nightclub Pulse.

"ISIS is to Islam as the Ku Klux Klan is to Christianity," she said. "I would never connect the Ku Klux Klan to the millions of peace-loving Christians around the world. It's the same thing with Muslims around the world, to take the actions of these horrible groups and say, 'This is how all Muslims believe, behave and feel.'"

"You do have bad Muslims. You have terrible Muslims. And I don't know why they do what they do."

Ahmed has three teenage children. She said every time they hear of a terrorist attack, they wait by the television. They refresh their smartphones. They hold their breath and pray the attacker was not a Muslim.

‘We will move forward’

Know Your Neighbor welcomes hundreds of visitors from different faith and community groups at each session, and the number has grown each month, Shakila Ahmad said. After Shabana Ahmed speaks to the visitors and the Imam walks them through the process of worship, they head to El-Sewedy International Academy for cookies, coffee and conversation with volunteers from the local Muslim community.

Many of these visitors, like Kif Corcoran, are driven by the same concerns that motivate the Islamic Center to hold the event: They say they want to know more about Islam, and they want to understand the lives and beliefs of Muslim people beyond the small, attention-grabbing snippets they see on television.



Kif Corcoran attended a Know Your Neighbor event at the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati with her husband, children and fellow parishioners from Harmony Unitarian Universalist Church. Photo by Sarah Walsh.

Corcoran, who attended Know Your Neighbor with her family and other parishioners from Harmony Unitarian Universalist Church in Maineville, Ohio, had never set foot inside a mosque before but felt her community could grow from interfaith exchange and understanding.

"I found the event on Facebook," she said. "It was beautiful. I learned so much about the Five Pillars of Islam, how they pray -- it was amazing to hear the Imam sing the call to prayer."

For Jill Steller of Fort Roberts, Kentucky, who attended with her friend Laurie Osterhus, it was an opportunity for her to learn enough to participate eloquently in political discussions with friends and acquaintances. The political division in the United States, she said, has made it more urgent than ever for citizens to be informed and active.

"I want to be educated enough that I can speak to it intelligently and calmly. With everything that's happening in this country right now, it's hit me in a way nothing else has in my life," she said. "I don't want to be panicky, but I'm hoping I'm that person who can step up and say, when something is happening, 'No, this isn't right.'"

During this time, Ahmad and Ahmed, among others, weave through the cafeteria and sit down to speak with visitors about their experience. So do Ahmed's daughter Maariyah and her friend Yasmeen Quadri -- both 16-year-old members of the ICGC Youth Group.

"It's actually really fun," Quadri said.

"It gives us the opportunity for people to ask questions and for us to ask them questions instead of everyone getting these ideas about each other from the media," Maariyah Ahmed said.



Maariyah Ahmed and Yasmeen Quadri, members of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati's youth group, chat with visitors during a Know Your Neighbor community outreach event. Photo by Sarah Walsh.

The two girls, as well as other members of their youth group, sat with Steller and other visitors to talk, joke and answer questions person-to-person.

It's this sight that gives Shakila Ahmad hope, she said. Her colleague, lawyer Nadeem Quirashi, likes to respond to questions about the future by paraphrasing Warren Buffett: [Always bet on America.](#)

It's a bet Ahmad and the rest of the Islamic Center are willing to make, even when the outlook ahead of them is uncertain.

"It's very easy to get bogged down in all the negativity in the world today, but I remind myself that there are far more good people than there are bad," Ahmad said. "We all have to stick together if we want this world to be a better place for all of our kids.

"We will move forward. We will continue to rely on good people to help us do that."

Visitors who wish to attend a Know Your Neighbor session can [contact the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati to sign up online](#). People of all faiths and backgrounds are welcome.

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