

CIVIC EDUCATION

in Action

INTERFAITH UNDERSTANDING HELPS AN ISLAMIC SCHOOL BLOOM. BY KARI ANSARI

STRONG VALUES, Strong leaders — In a quaint neighborhood in Herndon, Virginia, a unique occasion for interfaith and cultural dialogue is taking place. The 55 students of a small Islamic school, Al-Fatih Academy, are bustling, smiling and learning inside the home of sprightly octogenarian Mrs. Barbara Harding.

The early days of this Islamic school were sometimes touch-and-go. In the fall of 2001, Al-Fatih had to temporarily close due to a lack of facilities. Parents and faculty launched a desperate search to find a building to house the school. One day they read an article in the local newspaper, highlighting the life and career of Mrs. Harding who was retiring after 50 years of running a daycare and kindergarten in her historic home. They called and asked if she would consider renting her house to their school. Initially, she declined the offer as she was looking forward to enjoying her home in quiet retirement.

Not long after, Mrs. Harding called back. In conversations with staff and parents, she recalled the days of segregation when African-Americans were not allowed to drink out of the same drinking fountains as whites in Herndon. She felt she was witnessing similar hateful trends towards Muslims in her own community since Sept. 11, 2001. She was motivated to offer her help and her home to Al-Fatih Academy. Today, Al-Fatih happily resides on the first floor of Mrs. Harding's home.

Everyone feels her caring and experienced presence. Many of her family portraits adorn the walls of the administration office; her well-tended houseplants peek out of many places in the school; and, on special occasions, she bakes cookies for the children in her kitchen, which adjoins the preschool classroom. Mrs. Harding moves comfortably through the classrooms with an air of belonging to the group of school staff and students. Staff members regularly chat with her about educational approaches and classroom concerns. She has been keen to learn about Islam, and she is respectful of the faith just as the students are taught to be respectful of her Christian faith. Members



of the Herndon town council and Mrs. Harding's former students have become familiar and comfortable with the Muslim community, in large part because of the positive interactions in her home.

The town planning commission recently approved temporary classroom trailers for the property in order for the school to add a fifth grade. Al-Fatih is very grateful to Allah (*subhanahu wa Ta'ala*) and then to Mrs. Harding for the opportunity to rent

the current building, but the school's excellent reputation and natural growth rate has led to the need for more space. When asked if the school's intention is to eventually move facilities, Co-Director Afeefa Syeed says, "With more financial resources, the program can have the opportunity to serve more children in the community and reach its full potential." However, she, also, asserts that the school wishes to maintain small class sizes that

lend to individualized learning which is the basis of a strong integrated curriculum. This individualized learning approach has resulted in Al-Fatih students competing with and excelling beyond their national peers in academic performance.

The integrated curriculum's goal is to provide students with a balanced education both in Islamic and secular studies. Syeed, raised in the U.S., feels it is essential to teach children to be strong, prac-

ed into every lesson. Syeed gives the example of when 1st and 2nd graders learn about machines, building materials, and basic engineering. Using a variety of tools, the children conducted experiments demonstrating the mechanics of building and understood the relationship between the process and the product. Students then read the ayah from the Qur'an in which Allah commands Prophet Nuh ('alayhi as Salaam) to build the ark. Allah

threat of U.S. attack in Iraq, while another student's uncle was a U.S. Air Force pilot flying missions in Iraq. Despite the students' young ages, it was impossible to ignore difficult discussions on this complex issue. They responded to the situation by suggesting that they send needed supplies to children in Iraq. In cooperation with the Mennonite Central Committee, they provided relief and school supply kits and drew pictures with messages of hope for families in Iraq. Thus the 'Kids Giving Salam' campaign was born. The campaign includes many other projects in which staff and students are involved throughout the year. They collect jackets, hats, and mittens for a local homeless shelter; work with county social services to provide basic toiletries and gifts for orphans in foster care; and have formally "adopted" the street in front of the school for upkeep. On Arbor Day, they presented the Herndon Mayor with a mural that hangs in his office and helped plant a garden in the local senior retirement home. The children were invited to meet with President Bush in 2002, on the occasion of Eid ul Fitr, and talked to him about what peace means to them. Last Ramadan, the older children visited several public schools to give presentations on Islam and share their ideas on civic responsibility. The PeaceLeaders Program was developed to teach students conflict resolution skills and build their confidence.

Some may wonder, given the often desperate state of affairs among the Muslim community, why the school does not focus exclusively on helping Muslims. Syeed believes that it is counterproductive to raise Muslim children in a vacuum, isolated from their environment. The faculty and parents believe that teaching the children responsibility toward all human beings is crucial. By reaching out to society at large, they educate the entire community about the true tenets of Islam. Afeefa's face lights up when referring to the different ways the townspeople of Herndon have learned positive lessons about Islam through the school's efforts. All those affiliated with the school feel Allah has blessed their little school, and they are grateful for the opportunities they have been given to share the beautiful message of Islam.

Al-Fatih is small physically, but it is very large in heart and spirit. Through the efforts and encouragement of all involved, this school has proved that it is possible to raise children to be strong, practicing Muslims and responsible American citizens. ■

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Al-Fatih Co-director Afeefa Syeed with school benefactor Mrs. Harding. Left, Masouma explains how her "Homework Helper 2000" puts everything you need to do your homework in one place.

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ticing Muslims while also providing them with opportunities to learn poise and effectiveness in their interactions with the society at large. "It is important to teach cultural literacy," she says. Co-director Pervin Divleli, who was, also, raised in the U.S. says, "I remember growing up as a Muslim in public school, and I want it to be easier for our children."

Instead of teaching Islam as a formal subject, elements of the *deen* are integrat-

ed into every lesson. Syeed gives the example of when 1st and 2nd graders learn about machines, building materials, and basic engineering. Using a variety of tools, the children conducted experiments demonstrating the mechanics of building and understood the relationship between the process and the product. Students then read the ayah from the Qur'an in which Allah commands Prophet Nuh ('alayhi as Salaam) to build the ark that students were able to connect the vocabulary words used in the Qur'an — nails, planks of wood — with the very same materials they were exploring in the classroom. In addition, lessons on the importance of patience, perseverance and attention to detail were integrated into this unit on building.

The war in Iraq brought difficult challenges. Some children had family under