

"Islam Means Peace..." NCA&T Muslims Speak Out

Contributed by Jasmine Johnson -- Black College Wire
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They feel their faith is being misinterpreted

Islam means peace and submission in Arabic.

The basis of Islam is achieving peace through submission to the will of God.

With recent media coverage of Muslims and the Islamic faith in the U.S., many Muslims feel their faith is being misinterpreted. After Florida pastor Terry Jones threatened to burn Qur'ans on the anniversary of 9/11 many Muslims were in disbelief.

In New York City, families of 9/11 victims are speaking out vehemently against the building of an Islamic center blocks away from Ground Zero.

Among A&T's 10,000-plus students, Muslims have a presence on campus. Three of them agreed to share their stories.

Charissa Young is a 22-year-old marketing major and senior from Queens, N.Y. She starts her mornings at 5 a.m., getting up to pray to Allah. After her prayers, she returns to bed for a while before starting her day.

Although she converted in to the Islamic faith in May, Young remembers her entire journey began about three years ago. She met Muhammad Abdul-Ali, who is now her fiancé, around the same time.

She did not know much about Islam, but he had a big influence on what she learned. Young soon became more interested in the largest religion in the world.

After studying abroad in Morocco and living with a Muslim family for a semester, she really began to learn more about the faith.

"It [Islam] spoke to me like Christianity never did," Young said.

She began going to Friday prayer with her roommate, who is also Muslim. When Young made the decision to fully convert she did not tell anyone. She remembers the time as a real emotional one, but after she felt very comforted by other Muslim women. Young is a Sunni Muslim.

Her family was surprised, but she feels they expected it to an extent. She hopes that with time, her family will accept the change fully. Her mother's family is from Trinidad and her father's family is from Barbados.

She is one of few Muslims in her family. When she came to A&T, Young was a party student. Friends who knew her from freshman year probably remember her in the club Thursday through Sunday. Now, her friends do not ask her to go to the club because they know she will respectfully decline. Young is thankful for her friends who have remained by her side throughout the journey.

"I kind of disappeared," said Young. "I was just trying to find myself."

These days Young spends her time in class, with 15 credit hours, at the Ayantee yearbook, and in the American Marketing Association organization on campus. She also volunteers in the University Gallery and at a local center downtown as an assistant art teacher.

Young can be distinguished from other Muslim students on campus because she "covers." She began wearing a hijab about a month ago.

In the Islamic faith, some women wear hijabs to cover their hair. It is a sign of modesty before Allah, Young explains.

When students see her, sometimes they stare. Young acts like a regular college student, sometimes even forgetting she covers her hair. She thought covering would be the biggest change after she converted. It wasn't.

"Once you build a connection with God and realize who you're doing it for, you're doing it for God, it makes it a lot easier," confessed Young. "It's like nothing can stand in your way."

In addition to covering her hair, Young also wears clothing that covers from her wrist to her ankles.

With all the recent media on Muslims and Islam, Young thinks some of the coverage is ridiculous and people just want to find something to talk about.

Growing up in Queens, she doesn't understand why some do not want an Islamic center close to the Ground Zero. Or why Florida pastor Terry Jones would want to burn the Qur'an.

"If people really knew what a Mosque was, they wouldn't care," Young believes. "Islam is always in the media and it makes people scared. That comes from ignorance. He [Florida pastor] has the right to do what he wants to do. I think it's good in a way because maybe people will want to know more about it and will research Islam."

Young believes there are radicals in every religion, but Islam overall is a peaceful religion. The radical Muslims, others believe will be judged by Allah individually.

The ignorance also stems from stereotypes. It is thought often that Muslim women must submit to their husbands in all they do.

Abdul-Ali, Young's fiancé, sat listening to his wife-to-be patiently. Once even, politely asking to interject. "I know I didn't influence her," said Abdul-Ali. "I used to tell her over and over again- 'do not do this for me.' It is not acceptable for a female to convert for a male. It has to be something really in your heart to do."

Young wishes to convey to A&T students that Muslims are a peaceful people. People should not be afraid to talk to them, she suggests.

Ian Plummer, a junior history major and native of Greensboro, wears a kufi on his head in order to distinguish himself and show people about his faith.

He believes it is his responsibility to answer questions someone may ask about his faith. So the kufi is used as a conversation starter at times.

Plummer converted to Islam when he was 17 in high school. He received the Qur'an from his aunt and began reading.

"I was in a period in life when I was lost," confessed Plummer. "I believed in God, but didn't know what to believe. I started reading it [Qur'an] and thought it was the greatest thing I've ever read."

Plummer's family has been very open to his conversion to Islam, even taking trips to Mosque with him. His mother is Christian, but he believes she is on the fence about converting to Islam.

Before he was Muslim, he would go out and party, even engaging in underage drinking. Now he likes to spend time with family, go to the movies and read books on spirituality. Although he has never felt discriminated against on A&T's campus, he recalls being approached by others off campus.

"They would see me wearing a kufi or see my beard is bigger and ask my negative questions," remembered Plummer, "Questions like 'how come Muslims bomb everything?' or 'how come Muslims don't love Jesus?' There's a certain level of ignorance there."

Plummer used to take offense seeing others wear a kufi as a fashion trend. However, he says he does not anymore because he knows where it came from.

Plummer also finds it disturbing that Jones wanted to burn Qur'ans. He believes if the pastor had taken the time to read the book, he would've understood that key figures in the Bible are also in the Qur'an- Jesus, Jesus's mother; Mary, etc.

He feels people speaking out against the building of an Islamic center near ground zero are adding to what he calls "Islamaphobia" in America and are a misunderstanding.

"Islam does not condone acts of violence," he said. "Against civilians, women, children or anyone. If more Americans understood that, they would have a greater appreciation for Islam. In the Qur'an, it says that if you kill one person, it is the same as killing all mankind. If you save one person, it is like saving all mankind."

If he could put out a word to A&T students, Plummer wants them to know that Islam means peace. The word itself comes from a combination of the words peace and submission in Arabic.

He also encourages everyone to read and try to gain a better understanding by researching.

“Try to have a deeper understand of things, people and ideologies that are within this world,” he added. “Muslim has deeper roots within American history than people think.”

Plummer is working to establish the Muslim Student Association on A&T’s campus. Jazmin Rogers-Blackshear walked into the newsroom with leopard print shoes, Juicy Couture necklace and purse, four tattoos, and her hair pulled back into a ponytail. She is also Muslim.

Unlike Young, Blackshear does not cover. Although she modestly dresses to cover herself, she is a member of the Nation of Islam and a follower of Minister Louis Farrakhan.

A senior English major, from New Brunswick, N.J., Blackshear was raised in the Nation of Islam. Her mother grew up Episcopalian and her father was raised Baptist. They converted shortly after her birth.

On campus, Blackshear is senior class secretary, an orientation student leader and a campus life mentor. Blackshear insists she conducts herself like any other college student throughout the week. On the weekends however, she attends classes specifically for women and girls of the Islamic faith all across North America.

Her general civilization class teaches women how to cook, clean, sew, etc., things, which Blackshear believes, all women should know how to do.

Blackshear also admits to reading the Bible approximately once or twice a week. She also attends church from time to time.

“In church, I don’t think the preacher delivers a message as long as it should be,” said Blackshear. “If the word was longer, it would resemble a mosque more. We don’t sing. It’s just a lecture, not a sermon. That’s the same all around North America.”

Blackshear is one of a group of students who are working to bring back Nation of Islam Student Association. The organization has been off the yard for approximately six-ten years, according to Blackshear.

During its meetings, NOISA reviews current events, discusses weekly struggles and may play a video of Minister Farrakhan or another minister.

When she first heard the story of the plan to burn Qur’ans in Florida she thought it wasn’t real.

“How can someone be so cruel to do that,” asked Blackshear. “It was an attack on Muslims everywhere. Just imagine if the roles were switched; if someone burned the Bible, it would be an [outrage] against Muslims. The biggest religion in the world’s holy book; it was taken very lightly.”

After visiting the ground zero site within the last two months, Blackshear also doesn’t see an issue with building an Islamic center close by. Seeing strip clubs, pornography stores very close, she doesn’t feel it should be a problem.

Although she does not cover on a regular day-to-day, she does cover her hair while at Mosque. She admits she doesn’t know much about Sunni or Shiites within the Islamic faith, but knows that is what their denomination practices.

Blackshear enjoys reading, listening to hip-hop, R&B and gospel. She wishes people would stop believing what they see on TV.

“Don’t feed into it,” continued Blackshear. “If you’ve never heard Minister Farrakhan, don’t go off what people say or if you’ve never been to Mosque, experience it for yourself.”

These three students insist their religion should not be subjected to what is seen on TV. They encourage everyone to do research on Islam and what it truly means to be Muslim.

Jasmine Johnson is editor in chief of The A&T Register, the North Carolina A&T University student newspaper, which originally published a version of this article.

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