



The Center That Keeps on Giving

Chicago Muslims got a running start at community building with their first mosque

BY ASMA JARAD

WHILE GOING THROUGH GRADE school during the 1980s, I rarely if ever had Muslim classmates. My entire school body consisted of predominantly Christian white, Latino, and black classmates who had no idea of what Islam was. The curriculum never mentioned Islam or Muslims, and the teachers were oblivious to my cultural and religious distinction. In the second grade, my teacher Mrs. Berman asked each student to make a poster describing where our ancestors had come from. All of my classmates found their ancestral flag and information about their background from the class encyclopedia and atlas. When it was my turn to do my research, I found that these two sources contained absolutely no information on or even mentioned Palestine. It was as if Palestine did not exist.

This had an immediate and lasting effect upon my outlook and personal identity as a Palestinian-Muslim-American. I knew that I was American because I was born here.

I knew that I was Muslim because that's what I was raised as. And I knew that my ancestry was Palestinian because we had just visited the country during the summer. Palestine was real to me, even though my class encyclopedia didn't acknowledge it. I still remember when Mrs. Berman pointed to other countries on the world map that had Arabic as their national language, like Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia. I felt so demeaned when she asked me to pick one for my poster.

At that point in my life, I recognized that I was different. I longed for a place outside of home, one in which I could feel a sense of belonging, could relate to others and others could relate to me. For my family and about a dozen other Arab families living on the north side of Chicago, that place came in the form of the Muslim Community Center (MCC; <https://mccchicago.org>), where we gathered every Saturday morning for Islamic and Arabic classes. Going to Saturday school

also gave us a chance to meet up with Muslim and Arab friends.

A mosque like MCC in the heart of Chicago on the corner of North Elston Avenue and West Montrose Avenue was the premier Islamic hotspot for our small but diverse community at that time. There were special programs for women, men, families, and of course the youth. Daily prayers were conducted, as were the weekly *jumuah* sermon and prayer, monthly dinners with special guest speakers and annual fundraising dinners. I even got a peek at the traditions of South Asian Muslim cultures by sneaking into wedding ceremonies, which were often conducted on weekend evenings in the mosque's "Red Room." Before MCC became a mosque, it had actually been a fancy banquet hall.

In 1969, fifteen Muslims established MCC to serve the metropolitan area's small Muslim population. It's no coincidence that MCC was visualized and founded during this revolutionary decade of economic, political