

and social change. Over the years, the community grew and MCC acquired its reputation as a prominent Islamic center — one that still stands today. Many American Muslim leaders in got their start at this masjid. Hundreds like me took — and continue to take — their first glimpse inside the world of Islam in the U.S. by stepping inside MCC.

My Saturday school classmate Illiana Elayan recalls how MCC played an intrinsic part in her early life. “It was a place where my religious knowledge grew. I improved my Arabic language skills and I was introduced to girls who started out as friends but became my sisters,” she reminisces. “MCC ... allowed me to grow as a young Muslimah in America.” Indeed, today, as my generation of young conflicted Muslims has emerged as parents of school-aged children, we can take a step back and appreciate the value of our youthful involvement with the center’s Islamic and Arabic school.

Even though going to school on the weekend was sometimes a drag, since we didn’t exactly want to spend our day off from regular school in another school, going to MCC early on helped confirm our identity as Muslims in this country. We grew up in a place and at a time when the only Muslims we encountered on a regular basis were those of our own immediate family. MCC was a weekly gathering place to show us that we were not alone and that we belonged to a community.

“I have an extensive Muslim family that supports me and who I am,” Elayan states. Furthermore, reflecting upon her experience as an adult and mother, she notes, “I always refer back to my time spent at MCC. The deep connections to the people, the place and the religion are connections I want my children to have — a strong and loving atmosphere that will help aid them in growing into strong, confident Muslims in today’s society.”

Feda Awad, another MCC Saturday school classmate, fondly remembers her early experiences there and how they affected her life. “I found people that were of a similar background. It was a safe haven, a world to explore, a place of exotic dress and smells. Weddings from different cultures were hosted, a place where strangers met and became instant brethren and a home away from home. It was also where I met and befriended girls my age who knew exactly how it felt to be us.”

Surely, as children of parents who were raised overseas — parents who were imposing the overseas life on us, their American

children, we lived in cultural conflict. We felt disenfranchised at school due to cultural and religious differences, and by the expectations of our immigrant parents and extended family members that we would maintain their cultural identifications. Attending MCC helped bridge these divides in a way that made it possible to be both American and Muslim, as well as to be proud of our cultural heritage.

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As the mother of four boys and currently living in Abu Dhabi, Feda says that she wouldn’t be the person she is today if it wasn’t for those long-ago days spent at MCC. “My MCC experience makes me realize the absolute need for a community and a place where you feel you belong, a place where my children can feel comfortable practicing their faith without being stared at, somewhere that they can find friends that will carry them through adulthood no matter where they go.”

Most Muslim immigrants in the U.S. have a hard time adjusting to their new life. In their home countries they shared a common language, religion, culture and traditions. They had family and were living among all of their friends. They were comfortable practicing their faith and their traditions without the glare of foreign eyes. For these reasons, it is absolutely vital to have Islamic centers such as MCC in our communities to help reassure all of us that it’s okay to be who we are, that it’s our right to practice our religion as it’s meant to be practiced. Although we are obviously not the same as our other American counterparts, belonging to a mosque helps make Muslims of all cultural backgrounds feel the strength of community. This, in turn, propels us to work hard to be successful, which, in turn, makes the entire country successful.

Since 1969, MCC has helped the Chicago community in enormous ways. Many earlier immigrants did not have the opportunity to join a mosque and connect with other Muslims because no such facility was available. And so they had to choose between

assimilating into mainstream American society and holding on to a faraway culture and religion that grew more distant with every passing year. Unfortunately, many of them chose to assimilate. The establishment of MCC provided Muslims with another option, for the center represented a place where both the young and old could return to their religious roots. It created a safe haven where they could feel a sense of belonging

that, as Elayan says, “leads to stronger minds and hearts [that enable members] to go back into the world and be proud Muslims.”

The pioneers who established such community centers as MCC understood the importance of obeying God alone and, secondly, of what the freedom of religion actually meant. God will no doubt reward their hard work, and they are fully entitled to the gratefulness of the generations that follow in their footsteps as well as of those who simply enjoy the fruit of their struggles. It is because of our predecessors’ efforts to establish Islam as a resilient presence in this country, as well as of those who worked to include us, that we are able to proudly announce ourselves as Muslim Americans while simultaneously honoring our heritage. **ib**

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