

Ambassadors of Peace and Hope... The Khalil Gibran International Academy

Sarah Childers, Indiana

Debbie Almontaser built on her teaching career and history of “interfaith activism and outreach across the boundaries of race, ethnicity and religion”¹ to reach her dream of opening a school that would focus on Arab culture and language. Her vision was that the multicultural curriculum and environment of the school would help students to become “ambassadors of peace and hope.” However, days after her school’s plans were announced, she and the school board began receiving threats and criticism based not on Ms. Almontaser’s activities, record or career, but on her religion. Ms. Almontaser is a Muslim immigrant from Yemen.

The Khalil Gibran International Academy (KGIA), a public school in New York City, New York, opened in September of 2007. The school is funded in part by the American-Jewish World Service and the Christian Children’s Fund, and was planned in conjunction with the Lutheran Medical Center and American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee². However, before the school even opened its doors, Ms. Almontaser was forced to step down as the founding principal under a hailstorm of attacks. They began when a T-shirt reading “Intifada NYC” was made by Arab Women in Art and Media, an organization operating with the support of Saba: The Association of American Yemenis, where Ms. Almontaser is a board member. This slogan caused alarm, with the New York Post declaring that the shirts called for “a Gaza-style uprising in the Big Apple,” as well as “pro-violence,” “glorify(ing) Palestinian terror,” and calling Ms. Almontaser “revolting.”³

Fueled by the fear generated by the T-shirts, a movement began against the school generally and Ms. Almontaser specifically. Those opposing the school claimed that the school’s true purpose was not what it seemed – that in fact it’s goal was to indoctrinate students into Islam and turn them into terrorists.⁴

Local parents, with the help of national anti-

Muslim firebrand Daniel Pipes, formed a group called Stop the Madrassa. Their website reveals a frightening array of anti-Muslim slander and spin, which is used as justification of their views on the school. Most of their arguments against the school are comprised of inciting fear of the “other” by naming the school a madrassa (an Arabic word meaning “school” that has taken on a negative connotation in the media), using the word “intifada” as described above, using Ms. Almontaser’s birth name, Dhabah, instead of the name she has chosen to use professionally (Debbie) and playing a sketchy game of connect the dots between Ms. Almontaser and KGIA and any organization with a Muslim-sounding name.

Mr. Pipes sees the emergence of the school as just one in a string of nation-wide occurrences of Muslims “imposing their religious values in the public domain.”⁵ Simple accommodations for people with lifestyles and values different from the dominant culture, such as a local pool holding hours for women-only, or Muslims running for political office, are interpreted by Mr. Pipes as a “soft jihad,” or a slow insinuation of Islam and Muslims into American society – something he says should be feared and fought. Even teaching the Arabic language in school, according to Pipes, is a gateway to terrorism.

Since the school’s opening, lawsuits have been filed by Ms. Almontaser and Stop the Madrassa, both against one another and the New York Department of Education. The students at the school have been subjected to a chaotic environment of the press at the front doors and continuing public scrutiny.

Across the country, innumerable schools are preparing to begin a new school year, during which they will doubtless offer foreign language and bilingual instruction. In New York alone, 200 small schools focusing on Chinese, French or Russian will begin classes again. The Khalil Gibran International Academy will be reopening in a

(continued on page 13)



Ms. Debbie Almontaser

Photo from AP Photo by Diane Bon

My Reflection

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I wonder if Ms. Almontaser or her students have had negative experiences due to their dress, names and/or ethnicity. If their community publicly attacks KGIA, then what goes on in private?

I can speak to the prevalence of fear and bias against Muslims. Cowards who preferred to strike anonymously, firebombed my local mosque five years ago. In consideration of that event, what threats might have KGIA received, or Ms. Almontaser herself?

For a time, I chose to wear the *hijab*, or headscarf, on a daily basis as a symbol of my Muslim faith. I no longer do, except at services, largely because I personally no longer agree with the practice as a mandate, though I maintain full respect for those who choose to wear it. But to be honest with myself, there is an aspect to my choice that is about acceptance, feeling different, to the extent of receiving hostile glances, being judged and living with fear.



My sisters and me on Eid, 2005

Left to Right: Sadia (Pakistan), Wati (Malaysia), Coumba (Somalia) and me (USA).

Although I am white with blonde hair and blue eyes, when I don a hijab, I become the "other"; to many people, the enemy. As I wore the hijab, I realized how differently people looked at me (or often averted their eyes from me), treated me, spoke to me, identified me. My family was judged along with me. Without my hijab, our family is "normal" and white. But during the time period I wore it, our car was vandalized twice while parked in public places. I was scared that our children might be targeted next. Today, as I walk bare-headed and blonde,

I often feel pain at my choice, the easy road, compared to that of my Muslim sisters who continue to endure abuse for their chosen religious practice. Despite that, I am all the more dedicated to supporting the freedoms guaranteed us all to practice (or not) as we choose.

larger, quieter setting, where smaller group sizes can be maintained and the students' environment can be stabilized, hopefully without the need for a police guard on opening day.

Debbie Almontaser said in an interview with Amy Goodman of Democracy Now: "My last words are basically urging the American public to really develop a better understanding of the political agenda that is out there by people such as Daniel Pipes and right-wing groups who are going after prominent Muslim and Arab American leaders who are trying to make a difference in this country. It is so important to allow us to bridge the gaps and build bridges of understanding among people across this country and to, you know, continue in the healing process of developing a better country and a better world for all of humanity."⁶

It is now Ramadan (approximately Sept. 1 through Sept. 30), a perfect opportunity to act on Ms. Almontaser's advice to build bridges with your students or friends or neighbors who may be celebrating this month. Ramadan Mubarak! ■

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- 1 New York Times, 8/29/07, Samuel G. Freedman
- 2 New York Sun, 3/7/07, Sarah Garland "New Brooklyn School to Offer Middle East Studies"
- 3 New York Post, 8/6/07, Chuck Bennett and Jana Winter "City Principal is 'Revolutionary': Tied to 'Intifada NYC' Shirts"
- 4 CNN, 9/5/07, Richard Roth "New York public school accused of radical Islamist agenda"
- 5 New York Times, 4/28/08, Andrea Elliott "Critics Cost Muslim Educator Her Dream School"
- 6 Democracy Now, democracynow.org, 4/29/08, with Amy Goodman, "Ousted NYC Arabic School Principal Debbie Almontaser Speaks Out on the New McCarthyism and Rightwing Media Attacks"