

# The Oregonian

## Leap of faith

August 31, 2007 01:00AM

[http://blog.oregonlive.com/breakingnews/2007/08/leap\\_of\\_faith.html](http://blog.oregonlive.com/breakingnews/2007/08/leap_of_faith.html)



OLIVIA BUCKS/THE OREGONIAN

Nermine Ramadan, who will teach seventh-, eighth- and ninth-grade math and science, talks with high schoolers' parents during orientation day for the Islamic School and Oregon Islamic Academy of the Muslim Educational Trust in Tigard. She hopes to serve as a role model for students. "If you are a leader," she says, "you can be a leader wherever you are."

The Muslim Educational Trust in Tigard is adding a high school this year, the first of its kind in the Northwest

By Maya Blackmun

*I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream, a song, a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America.--  
Khalil Gibran*

TIGARD -- Sitting under a large oak in the courtyard of the Muslim Educational Trust near Washington Square, Wajdi Said quietly reflects on Khalil Gibran's words. As the trust's executive director, he's shared them this summer with four of the school's students who are seedlings of the new Oregon Islamic Academy.

Said had recounted a long passage from Gibran to the students, but he altered the Lebanese American poet's words to note that the school's rising ninth-graders have ties to countries throughout the world. Said repeats Gibran's declaration that though they may be young trees whose roots were plucked from hills far from America, they can say to its founders: "I am deeply rooted here, and I would be fruitful."

On Wednesday, the four students will join two others in the academy's inaugural class as the trust takes a measured step toward providing a full high school education in an Islamic school -- a first in the Northwest.

Said doesn't care about being first, but he does care deeply that the coed academy will last. The school is growing, with 16 teachers and 125 students in grades pre-kindergarten and higher, up from 89 last year.

But he wants to learn from the missteps of other private schools, to keep from trying for too much too soon. He wants to ensure that the school continues to prepare students who are not only accomplished and ready to excel in college, but are also solid in their Islamic faith and primed to be stalwart U.S. citizens and leaders.

Haider Shaker, one of the four students who will move from eighth to ninth grade at the school, is excited about its start.

But he couldn't help but feel the two-acre campus' three new buildings were a bit of a letdown. The rectangular buildings, which will serve the middle and high school students with room for computer and science laboratories, appeared different from the architect's sketch.

"We've seen plans up on the wall -- we've been waiting for a long time," says the 14-year-old, who was looking forward to a huge building with a gym and a Jacuzzi.

All that's part of the master plan for a two-story schoolhouse that also will house the library in the future, says Sahar Bassyouni, a trust board member with a kindergartner and fourth-grader at the school. But simply starting the academy itself -- away from the temptations and troubles of public schools -- she says, is "a dream come true for a lot of us."

Leading wherever possible

Nermine Ramadan knows the challenges of adolescence. Ramadan, 48, is a first-time teacher at the school and a retired software integration engineer who once worked for Intel. She also has two grown children and a 5½-year-old kindergartner at the school.

Ramadan, who will teach math and science to seventh- and eighth-graders and math and physics to the ninth-graders, wants to guide them as leaders in their professions and at home by serving as a role model.

"If you are a leader, you can be a leader wherever you are," she says.

Muslim women have been prime ministers and presidents and yet face presumptions and prejudices, she acknowledges. Showing patience and kindness after drawing stares in the grocery store or behind the wheel of a car can reveal one's character, she said.

"If you wear this," she says, pointing to her hijab, the head covering of devout Muslim women and a required part of the school's dress code for girls, "all eyes are on you."

She wants her students to draw from their faith and heritage as a source of strength, because "being different is not bad and this is a country of diversity."

Young Muslim men may feel unease and suspicion from others as they grow into adulthood, said Jawad Khan, 29, who is in his seventh year as a teacher at the school. But proving bigots wrong isn't in the forefront of his students' minds.

"Most of them don't see themselves as, 'I'm going to be an exemplar of a Muslim man,'" Khan said. "They just want to be kids."

Khan, who will teach language arts and history to sixth- and ninth-graders this year, sees the academy not as an isolated haven but more as a greenhouse where the students' Muslim beliefs can grow. It's a chance the 1995 graduate of Lakeridge High School would have liked to have had.

Looking back, he wishes his teenage peers had been equally committed to the personal conduct required of Muslim youths -- especially respect for girls and women. The ribbing and peer pressure can wear on Muslim teenagers, said Khan, who has a 4-year-old in the school's pre-kindergarten program.

In the past, before the start of the high school program, he told worried parents that he was confident their teenagers would fare well in their next school, having already lived 18 hours a day in the broader society with television and other exposure to non-Muslim life. But he's curious to see how the academy's high schoolers will fare.

"I think," Khan says, "they think of themselves as role models now."

Leading the way

Nima Mohamed, another incoming ninth-grader, came up with the idea for last Saturday's new student orientation. She, Haider and a group of five rising eighth-graders crowded around a laptop on a recent afternoon to work out the agenda.

"Someone has to prepare you to be in a Muslim school," said Mohamed, who considers language arts as her favorite subject, social work a possible career and state colleges as backups.

"You have to go through tests of life and it's harder," said the Aloha 14-year-old, who likes to hang out with friends and chat on the Internet.

She feels the teen years are the most important time to be in an Islamic school and that students' maturity makes learning the values of Islam more meaningful.

Her personal heroes are her sisters, who attend Portland Community College and Portland State University. They went to public high schools but held firm to their Muslim beliefs without having a hard time.

"They had their own opinion," she said, "and kept it."

Parents' hopes

Rosalinda Shaker, Haider's mother, wasn't eager at first at the thought of her older son going to the academy. The Beaverton mother, who has a seventh-grade son and a fifth-grade daughter at the school, wanted Haider to go to a public high school. She wanted him to experience life with teenagers with other racial, ethnic and religious backgrounds "in the real world" she said he'll be a part of one day.

She wanted him to see how others conduct their lives and to make choices about what he can and can't do.

As it is, his life since first grade has revolved around the school, homework and time with family and friends -- all Muslim. He has played sports with non-Muslim children but spent time with them only at practice or games.

But then his mother saw how important going to the new high school program was to the boy.

"Every child has their needs," she said. "I trust him."

Her older son counts physical education as his favorite subject and envisions going to Stanford University or the Massachusetts Institute of Technology to become a scientist or engineer. He holds his father, a business manager who commutes monthly to Abu Dhabi, in high regard as a leader.

His mother knows that if he is to make good decisions that affect the lives of others he must start with making some of his own key choices.

Said, the executive director, believes the students will.

"The world is waiting for these kids to produce in the future," he says. "We're just laying the foundation."

-- *Maya Blackmun*; [mayablackmun@news.oregonian.com](mailto:mayablackmun@news.oregonian.com)