

A Muslim describes his life in America

Published Thursday, February 23, 2012

Proponents call him a human rights activist.

Critics accuse him of supporting radical Islam.

Hassan Shibly describes himself as a husband, father and proud American.

Shibly, a 25-year-old University at Buffalo Law School graduate, serves as executive director of the Tampa chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a controversial Muslim advocacy and civil liberties organization with 32 chapters throughout the United States.

Since his appointment in August, Shibly has faced parents attempting to ban CAIR speakers from Hillsborough County Schools and allegations of terrorist affiliations. The School Board did not side with the parents.

The accusations, Shibly says, are a symptom of what CAIR defines as Islamophobia, an unfounded fear of and hostility toward Islam.

As an advocate for Muslim rights, Shibly has reached out to the community at public speaking engagements and open houses, urging those with the questions about Islam to ask not assume.

The most recent Muslim Community Open House and Understanding Islam Presentation took place Feb. 10 at the Islamic Community of Tampa building.

An interfaith crowd including Christian pastors, a rabbi and a Hindu priest attended. Shibly spoke about the history of Islam, misunderstandings about the faith and a call for tolerance.

"When we don't know each other we start to have misconceptions," Shibly says. "Our best line of defense (against Islamophobia) is to get to know each other on a human level. We say come, get to know us."

Shibly recently shared his thoughts about being Muslim in America with *Tampa Bay Times* staff writer Sarah Whitman.

What is your background as a Muslim American?

I came to the states with my parents from Syria at 4 years old. From a young age growing up, I felt like I had to justify my existence. Even before 9/11 (Sept. 11, 2001) I faced questions. Others kids would ask, 'Why don't you eat pork?' 'Why aren't you allowed to date?'

When 9/11 happened, I was in 10th grade. I remember running home to my prayer rug praying and crying for all the victims. As an American Muslim, I suffered that day for my country. Then suddenly, I'm seen as a terrorist. It's like if someone hits your mother and blames you for it. And that has been the situation ever since.

What prompted your interest in civil rights work?

When I was in college, I attended an Islamic conference in Canada about Muslims being a beneficial and positive force in society. I was traveling with my mother. Coming back, we were stopped at the border. They said we had to come in for a random inspection. There were about 40 people detained in a room. I felt like I was in my local mosque because they were all Muslim. We were there for five to six hours. Many were interrogated, fingerprinted and photographed. As an American, it changed my perspective. I recognized the importance of the freedoms that make our country so great and preserving those freedoms for all people.

Why invite the community into a mosque for an open house?

Because we have to work together. We're not saying we're all the same. We're saying that need not lead us to hate each other.

We're still at a level where we have to tell people, 'Listen, however you've been brought up to believe, most Muslims aren't terrorists.' We're still trying to bring that message across.

Have you experienced a good turn out at the open houses?

At the first open house, we had hundreds of people. The last one we had a few dozen. Things like what happened between us and the public schools get so much press, but it is a continuous effort for us to publicize events like this.

Were you surprised by the reactions of people who did attend?

I was shocked at the impact the first open house had. A couple ladies that were there started crying. They said they'd never been in a mosque before. They said 'We had no idea it was so peaceful.' I was shocked at how much they valued the presentation.

What do you want people in the community to know about CAIR?

We have a lot more in common than divides us.

We want people to reach out to us. Just call and set up a time for a discussion. Whether it's a one-on-one or for a community event, we want to discuss religious issues and community issues.

As a family man, how do you view your work in terms of importance for future generations?

I just want this to be the best possible community for my children to live in. I want them to feel free to practice their faith without bullying or harassment. My children are 2 and 1. Whenever I get home and my little 'Boo-Boo' runs up and gives me a big hug, it makes all the stress of the world fade away.

Do you worry for your safety working in such a controversial field?

The first week I got here, I already started receiving death threats against myself and my family. It's a risk we all take, but the work needs to be done. We can't let fearmongers stop us. While there is worry in the back of my head, I have to trust in God.

This interview has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Hassan Shibly, executive director of the Tampa chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, recalls the harsh atmosphere created by Sept. 11. "Suddenly, I'm seen as a terrorist. It's like if someone hits your mother and blames you for it."



[KATHLEEN FLYNN | Times]



[Courtesy of Hassan Shibly]

Shibly, here with his son, came to the U.S. at age 4. "From a young age growing up, I felt like I had to justify my existence."