

Illinois Muslim family pursues American Dream

By Jim Nowlan

In 1984, Sharif Sidi-Haji, now of Galesburg, was flying across Africa. His American seatmate asked Sharif about his dreams for the future. “My dream,” said Sharif, then 28, “is to go to college in the USA.”

The young Somali must have made a terrific impression, for the American granted Sharif’s wish and paid all his tuition and expenses for four years at Knox College in Galesburg!

Sharif and his wife Zeinab thus started life as Muslims in a small city in central Illinois, where I met them while I was teaching at Knox. An editor of this writer’s asked for a column about what it is like to be Muslim in Illinois, so I asked Sharif, Zeinab and their three children, Muhibo, 23; Khalid, 22, and Zak, 18.

Life has been good for Sharif and his family. “People have been very respectful of us in Galesburg,” says Sharif, adding that most probably did not even know they were Muslim, as his wife and daughter Muhibo don’t generally wear the Muslim head covering, the hi-jab.

The children went through the Galesburg schools with basically straight-As and no problems fitting in.

“When friends learn that we are Muslim,” observes Zak, “they ask us about such things as Ramadan (the ninth month on the Muslim calendar when observant Muslims

neither drink liquids nor eat between dawn and sunset) and how we manage it.” (It’s tough, they say.)

The dividing line in their experience has been 9-11. Before that there were no problems whatever; after, according to Khalid, “People began to link Islam and terrorism.”

Khalid, a 2010 graduate in biology from the University of Chicago, is exasperated with what he considers a lack of understanding of Islam, fostered in large part, he thinks by the media and especially by Fox News.

“The reporter who said he was uncomfortable when he sees Muslims on a plane,” begins Khalid, starting a list, “the Mosque in Manhattan, and the preacher who planned to burn the Koran because Islam was apparently evil. These are all things that paint Muslims in a negative light.”

“Most don’t know that Islam originated, as did Christianity,” adds Sharif, “with the Old Testament, and that Muslims consider Jesus a great prophet.”

Sharif and his articulate family note that Islam is a religion of peace, and the suicide bombers, Osama Bin Laden and others who do violence in the name of Allah are perverting the true religion of Islam.

The family practices Islam without much difficulty. There is a Mosque in Peoria, an hour distant, and meat from animals blessed in the name of Allah before slaughter is available in that city as well. This is part of keeping Halal, similar to keeping Kosher in Judaism.

The remarkable thing about being Muslim in Illinois for the Sidi-Hajis is how normal it has been, including the disciplined quest to capture the American Dream of

success. Muhibo, a Knox graduate, teaches first grade in a high poverty school in the Chicago Public School system; Kahlid, who is this year a scientific research project coordinator, plans to go to medical school, and Zak, a freshman at the University of Chicago, is also a pre-med student.

What surprises Sharif, who works as a truancy officer for the Galesburg area schools, is that so few of the parents around him seem to share this quest for the American Dream.

“In my household, Zeinab and I talked about education every day,” says Sharif, “and the children heard that. We saved every penny for education, and we pursued and sacrificed what it took to get our children into the best colleges.

“For too many Americans, expectations for their children end at high school. But you must lead the children into high expectations for life and study beyond high school. Too many American families have lost focus on the opportunities that exist for young people who have been imbued with the expectations that they are to excel in what they are good at.”

Yes, Sharif and Zeinab and now their children are American-Muslim citizens who are following in the tradition of so many first-generation Americans, who see the opportunities and have been working diligently to take advantage of them.

Cutline: The Sharif Sidi-Haji family at their home in Galesburg. From left are Zak, Sharif, Zeinab, Muhibo and Khalid.