

Islamic Center open house draws crowd of 1,000



Rizwan Ali, imam of the Islamic Center of Naperville, sits with an open Quran that visitors were allowed to explore during an open house Sunday. (Alex Keown / Naperville Sun)

By **Alex Keown**
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For almost four hours, Mansoor Syed shared information about his Islamic faith and the Prophet Muhammad with hundreds of people who attended an open house at the Islamic Center of Naperville on Sunday afternoon.

An estimated 1,000 people visited the center, picked up pamphlets on the tenets of Islam and learned about Islamic and Arabic contributions to the sciences and arts. Visitors sampled various foods from the Mediterranean region. But the multiple dialogues between Muslims and people of other faiths was the real meat of the event and something that Syed said will stick with him for a long time.

Syed, of Naperville, said he was not only pleased with the large numbers of non-Muslims who visited the center Sunday, but was happy to take the chance to talk to people about his faith and discuss any

misconceptions about Islam or perceived prejudices that visitors may have had. One of the best conversations he had was with an older Jewish woman who shared her own experiences with prejudice, he said.

"That conversation really made me happy. It made my day," Syed said. "People have been so open and forthcoming. This (open house) is a great platform for telling people about who we are and how we are part of the community."

Syed, who immigrated to America from India, said the open house was designed to spark an interfaith dialogue among people in the community. Although there have been acts of violence conducted by some Muslims in the name of Islam, Syed stressed that Islam has a fundamental tenet of peace. Of those acts of terrorism, Syed added that many of the victims of the violence are Muslims who do not adhere to a radical ideology.

With some political campaigns ramping up the anti-Muslim rhetoric, Rizwan Ali, a high school teacher and the imam at Islamic Center of Naperville, said he and his parishioners wanted to hold the open house to provide answers to anyone with concerns or questions.

"We wanted to create an open and honest dialogue about Islam," Ali said.

Over the course of the open house, Ali and other members of the Islamic Center fielded questions about terrorism, female oppression, Shariah, interfaith marriage, clothing standards, halal practices and more.

One of those question seekers was Audi McGee, of Aurora.

She sat down with Ali to talk about how Shariah, the Islamic law, works within existing state and local law, hoping to gain an understanding of how Muslims view Jesus as a prophet, rather than the son of God, as Christians view him, she said. McGee, a Christian, said she came to the mosque Sunday to learn about Muslims herself, rather than rely on anything she might read in the news or one social media.

"They are so nice here. I really wanted to learn more and find out more," McGee said.

Alex Keown is a freelance reporter for the Naperville Sun.

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