

All in good faith

A small nonprofit rooted in Oregon's Muslim community has become an unexpected haven for families in need



PHOTO BY KEN HAWKINS

BY STACY BROWNHILL
STAFF WRITER

Zakat, one of the pillars of Islam that obliges all Muslims to practice charitable giving, is at the heart of Islamic Social Services of Oregon State (ISOS). In the nine years since it started, the little-known nonprofit has helped at least 300 families, Muslim and non-Muslim, with \$300,000 of financial support.

In contrast, Muslim Americans are still more likely than other religious groups to report discrimination, even though the vast majority say they are loyal to the United States, according to a Gallup poll released in August. And testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee earlier this year showed that anti-Muslim bigotry has significantly risen in communities, workplaces and schools since Sept. 11, 2001.

Laila Hajoo, president of ISOS, started the 501(c)(3) partly to raise awareness. "There is no more effective way to get people to listen to our message of friendship than when they need help," says Hajoo.

Street Roots sat down to talk with ISOS's president on everything from their charitable cases to her thoughts on Muslim-American relations after 9/11 and the controversial bombing plot in Pioneer Courthouse Square earlier this year.

Stacy Brownhill: *What services does ISOS provide, and is it just for Muslims?*

Laila Hajoo: In the beginning, we served only Muslims and mostly refugees. But that scope was

limited. There were other people that needed help. Now we serve everyone of all faiths in Oregon and southwest Washington, whether you're Muslim or non-Muslim.

Our cases are really unique. Over 45 percent of the people we help are single mothers. A large percentage are disabled. We look at each case based on its individual merits and try to sit down with each person and look at what's happened and how she can lift herself up by her own bootstraps. We ask applicants to come up with a self-sufficiency plan, and we want to see what other agencies they've gone to first. Once we figure out what additional services she needs, then we reach out.

One woman lost her family's whole income when she lost her job teaching and her husband returned home from Afghanistan. She came to us. When her husband found out that an Islamic social services organization was helping his wife, it really hit him — how can he look at a person (in Afghanistan) who may be innocent and find out that a Muslim organization is helping his wife at home?

Another female client wears the full veil, has two young daughters, grew up in the U.S., and cannot get hired for a job. Every employer has said she needs to remove her veil. Even DHS told her

"There is no more effective way to get people to listen to our message of friendship than when they need help,"

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Day of Dignity

Oct. 1, Hawthorne Bridge

STAFF REPORT

For the past five years, the Portland Islamic community has hosted a Day of Dignity, part of an annual nationwide campaign launched by Islamic Relief USA after 9/11 to bridge the Muslim pillar of charity with a larger community in need: the homeless.

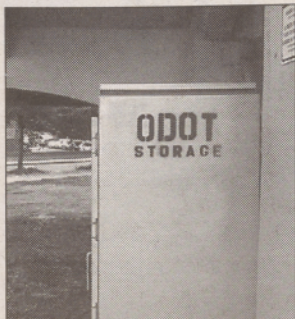
The event draws hundreds of homeless men and women, families and children of the Portland area for free services and vital provisions to help in their daily lives. It also brings together a diverse network of social services, organizations and agencies, including Catholic and Jewish programs, for a common cause.

On Oct. 1, under the Hawthorne Bridge, the Day of Dignity will provide free hot meals, medical checkups, HIV/AIDS testing, haircuts and additional supplies. The event is sponsored by Islamic Social Services of Oregon State, or ISOS, and Islamic Relief USA.

For nearly a decade, ISOS has been weaving a safety net for people, often refugees, ferried to the U.S. through social services for the

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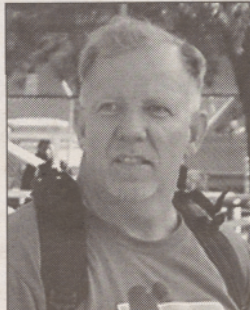
Inside



ODOT settles on homeless property case

Campers will get a 10 day reprieve to move belongings

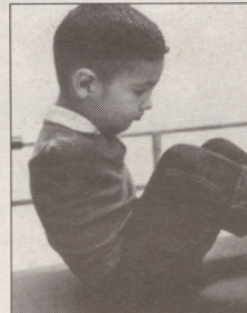
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Taking a long walk through the valley of homelessness

Stephen Millhouse, formerly homeless, hits the skids again

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'We will get justice'

Victims of the drug thalidomide want a formal apology from its maker

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