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sell property, and to participate in civic and political engagement.

Upon their visit to Polovina's mosque on Southeast Foster Road, Williams' students didn't really know what to expect. But like most visitors, they were touched by the graciousness of their host.

But there was one thing about the visit the students found unsettling.

Across the street and a couple hundred yards away from the mosque, a large billboard proclaimed, "Jesus ... Your Only Way to God," with an image of the crucifixion.

Funded through Christian Aid Ministries' Gospel Billboards program, the advertisement was the first thing several of the students noticed when they got out of their cars in the mosque's



parking lot.

"We felt like that was a fairly insensitive message to be right in front of this Muslim mosque," Williams said.

Through a large window in the prayer hall, the billboard's message was clearly visible from where the students and Muslims knelt in prayer.

It has since been replaced with a McDonald's advertisement.

Regardless of whether the billboard's proximity to the mosque was intentional, its polarizing message serves as a reminder of why Polovina's approach to spiritual leadership is necessary.

For him, sharing Islam with non-Muslims is an integral part of his calling. But it's not one-sided. He seeks out the truths of other religions as well.

He believes shared understanding among different religions is the key to peace, and he strives to help followers of different faiths see the values they share, rather than

focusing on the differences that separate them.

He was the first Muslim ever to enroll at Seattle University's School of Theology and Ministry - a Catholic college. He graduated with a master's degree in 2015.

What the billboard's sponsors may not realize is what Polovina learned while studying religions of the world: The Bible shares many teachings

and religious figures with the Quran, including Jesus, who is an important prophet in Islam.

Jesus and the Prophet Muhammad taught many of the same universal values, such as peace, love and justice, Polovina explained.

Williams, who teaches a class called "Judaism, Christianity and Islam," said the three religions are all "Abrahamic," meaning they are derived from Abraham.



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"I don't think a lot of people realize how much they are pulling from the same origins," she said.

All three religions are also monotheistic. "They essentially worship the same God, the same tradition of God," she said. Where Islam and Judaism are more focused on submission and practice, Christianity is more focused on belief, orthodoxy and proper doctrine, she said, "but they definitely overlap."

With more than 1 billion followers worldwide, Islam is the world's second-largest religion, after Christianity.

"There is so much polarization," Polovina said. "When actually, we go deeply in his (Jesus's) teaching, and the teaching of our Prophet and in general of Islam, we see so many similarities, and something that can connect us more than disconnect us."

Polovina's mosque is housed at the Bosniaks Educational & Cultural Organization, or BECO. The large, two-story building and adjoining playground serve as a community center where Bosnians come together for religious and non-religious events and gatherings.

More than 200 Bosnian families belong to BECO, although not all members are practicing Muslims. Most fled Bosnia-Herzegovina following the genocide that ended in 1995. They were the targets of a brutal ethnic cleansing campaign waged against them by Bosnian Serbs.

Polovina, who grew up in Bosnia-Herzegovina, was wounded three times during the war - once when he was shot in the leg during a sniper attack.

Now, he said, he teaches others to appreciate freedom.

"Because in Bosnia, we fought for that freedom, and we know the value of freedom to others here, to young people, that we need to be careful in which way we deal with each other because we know it is so hard when that freedom is attacked. Freedom in America is still there, but we need to build it in a way."

More than 100,000 people were killed and more than 2 million were displaced as a result of the Bosnian War. Polovina estimates that roughly 350 to 400 Bosnian Muslim families live in the Portland and Vancouver metro areas.

Before the war broke out, Polovina said, Bosnia-Herzegovina was a multicultural country where people of different faiths shared a mutual respect.

"We believe that we, from Bosnia, we are the crossroads between East and West," he said. "From our historical experience, we can motivate and inspire our friends here to understand it's OK to disagree, but despite

all the disagreement, despite all our differences, we live in a time in which we need each other."

The country's capital city of Sarajevo, where Polovina grew up, married and started a family, has long been known as a cultural crossroads of Europe, where East meets West.

It was also where Polovina discovered his calling and first led his community as an imam.

In 2000, his cousin invited him to visit Seattle during Ramadan, Islam's sacred month of fasting. While he was there, he met refugees from Bosnia who urged him to move to the U.S.

Three months later, he did.

"Families from Bosnia needed a spiritual leader to help them to overcome the

struggles in a new country," he explained. "Language was one barrier, along with financial problems, the constant search for an adequate job, culture shock and spiritual thirst."

He led the Islamic Community of Washington for 12 years before moving to Portland with his wife and five children, where he's become known as an advocate for Portland's greater Muslim community, as well as for the Bosnian Muslims he represents.

"He has been instrumental in bringing that very enclosed and marginalized community to the front lines of positive

partnerships with the city," said Natasha Haunsperger, a police officer assigned to the Portland Police Bureau's Office of Community Engagement.

Polovina has been an active member of the Police Bureau's Muslim Advisory Council since its establishment in 2015, helping officers understand how to work with his community and also how to recruit younger Muslims to the force.

Haunsperger said Polovina has invited police officers to Friday prayers at his mosque and has given them tours of BECO. She said he serves as the department's liaison to Muslims living in East Portland, often meeting with East Precinct commanders over cups of tea.

"He also participates in our monthly meetings," she said, "where we're trying to figure out how to address current issues, such as the perceived rise of Islamophobia, and how to portray the local Muslim community in its true light."

Jan Elfers, director at Ecumenical Ministries of Oregon, has gotten to know Polovina through speaking at BECO's annual anniversary of the genocide at Srebrenica.

Srebrenica is a town in Bosnia-Herzegovina where 8,000 Muslim men and boys were massacred in 1995.



"I would like for people to see me not just as Imam but as a human being that is doing something for that common good."

IMAM ABDULAH POLOVINA