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Portland during Ramadan

Muslim community comes together for holiest month

BY MINDY COOPER
 THE PORTLAND OBSERVER

The inside of the Muslim Community Center on Northeast Martin Luther King Jr. Boulevard doesn't match the plain exterior of the building, where, once inside, members of the community vibrantly decorate the center's mosque, read prayers from the Qur'an and enjoy each other's company during their holiest month of the year.

For nearly one billion Muslims across the world, the holy spiritual days of Ramadan is considered a time for personal and spiritual growth, when you abstain from food, drink, and other physical needs during the hours of daylight to purify self and re-focus attention towards God.

"It's a blessing and a mercy for us," said Omar Shbaz. "Each Ramadan brings you a different experience and challenge."

Ramadan, which is based on the Islamic lunar calendar, began on Aug. 1 this year.

Lavada Marion Poole-Dawan's dark skin was dressed in a long gown and hair covered when I first met her at the center, a local landmark for 30 years.

As someone who has been part of the northeast Portland Muslim community for almost 25 years, she welcomed me into the women's reception area, where Arabic art rests on the walls. She offered me a head covering to wear while visiting the building, and then began our conversation with a prayer.

According to Poole-Dawan, the Qur'an is for all mankind. "It's for all of humanity," she said. "The human family."



PHOTO BY MINDY COOPER/THE PORTLAND OBSERVER
 During Ramadan, Islam's holiest time of the year, Lavada Marion Poole-Dawan spends her time inside Northeast Portland's Muslim Community Center, where she has been a member for almost 25 years.

Ramadan is the month when the Qur'an was first revealed, she said. "What was given came from the creator of the heavens and the earth through the angel Gabriel to the heart of the Mohammed the prophet."

She said, for her, Ramadan is always glorious because of the way the community comes together for the requirements of Islam.

"In the month of Ramadan we try to accomplish reciting the entire Qur'an," she said. "Every day we recite 1/30th, and we are blessed and favored to have with us those who have memorized the Qur'an."

According to Ahmed Negawo, who has lived in the city for seven years, Portland is a wonderful place to be Muslim. "It's a good community," he said. "Every night we eat and we celebrate the break together. It's a family gathering."

Within the Islamic tradition, a time for prayer happens five times throughout the day. Although during Ramadan there are special traditions and practices each individual undergoes, Negawo said the prayers happen all year long.

"During Ramadan you spend more time in prayer, and it makes you stronger than ever before," he said. "It's a time to purify yourself."

Fasting for the month of Ramadan is one of the five pillars of Islam, said Poole-Dawan.

She said, although often unrecognized, mosques are present in almost every neighborhood throughout the city. "Traditionally," she said, "we live around the mosques so we can pray five times a day."

Although the requirements of Ramadan, including fasting, are often a challenge, the month-long holiday is a spiritually rewarding time, said Shbaz. "I approach each day one day at a time," he said. "I feel less inclined

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Healthy Community Celebrated

The African American Health Coalition on Saturday held a community event to bring awareness to the health disparities facing local African Americans and to celebrate a healthy future at the 9th annual Wellness Walk, which began at Dawson Park in north Portland.

Before the walk began, residents who attended the event joined in an exercise in the park, where there was also food, music, dancing and massage. All proceeds raised will be given directly towards the physical activity programs with the coalition, which is located at 2800 N. Vancouver Ave.



Dawson Park in north Portland is packed with participants for last Saturday's 9th annual African American Health Coalition Wellness Walk.

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 MARK WASHINGTON/
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