

Therese & Damali

Therese Jawneh, 54, Registered Nurse, Belizean

“I converted to Islam in 1995, but before that, I wore the hijab a couple of times. I went to Friday prayer around 1993, and I didn’t have a hijab to wear even though I knew I needed to cover my head. I had just moved to El Paso, Texas, and my mom had called me and told me that there was someone who lives in El Paso that she wanted me to meet. An 80 year old lady; she was Mormon. We had spoken on the phone, and I had mentioned to her that I wanted to go to Friday prayer, but I didn’t have a scarf to put on my head. She responded, ‘I have one.’

I had always wanted to find a faith that I could feel comfortable with. I just remember that when I would put on [the hijab] and go to the masjid, [friends] would say, Oh, my God, you look so beautiful.’ I think it’s those little things: when people make comments that are positive, it stays in the back of your head.

One day I had a dream: I had always wanted children. I already had [my oldest,] Damali, then had a divorce. After I converted to Islam, I had a dream that I had a hijab on in a van that was filled up with children. After I remarried, I had struggles with conceiving. We tried for almost six years. Around 2006, I said to myself, ‘I probably should make a commitment to God.’ [The dream influenced me], so I did. Then a year later, I had my daughter, Mamma. I didn’t bargain or anything, I just thought that wearing the hijab [was the right thing to do]. I just made the commitment.

[Getting to work] as a nurse, I can express my religion [appropriately]. For example, I’ll wear different hijabs [that resemble a tight beanie]. Then when I’m out and about in the community, even if I go to a meeting at work, I’ll wear it [traditionally]. [Patients] might ask me about it, and I get to talk about how this is my religion and this is the way I express it. [I’ll often] get complimented.

[The requirement of covering in Islam is not out of the ordinary.] Look at women all over the world: more women cover than not. Hindus cover, Sikhs cover. In Romania, the older women cover. Even in some Christian churches, women cover. [Covering] and wearing the hijab is a sign of respect. When I even saw and realized that, I was like, ‘Hey, it’s not only Islam. A lot of women around the world cover. Why should I [stand out negatively] and be any different?’”

Damali Stennette, 30, Teacher, Belizean/Panamanian-American

“When my mom converted to Islam, I was two years old. I grew up going to the masjid with her, but I also grew up going to church with my dad. I always felt like I was Muslim, [especially around the time] I was 12. I used to say I was Muslim, too. So the summer I [finished] sixth grade, going into seventh grade, middle school, I did this summer program at my mosque [the Unity Center]. It was called, The Road to Join, and when the program was almost over, towards the end of the summer of 2005, I was like, ‘I want to take my *Shahada* (declaration of faith).’ So I did. At that point, that’s when I considered myself as a Muslim completely by choice.

I went through ups and downs like a normal teenager—sometimes I would be really practicing and praying, and sometimes I would slack off, but I always knew I was Muslim. I have always loved Islam. I always loved going to the masjid. I didn’t wear hijab during my teenage years, but there was one summer, the summer when I graduated high school, that I decided I was going to wear the hijab. And I had a date set. When that day came and I didn’t start wearing the hijab, and I was like, ‘Oh my God.’

[So, I eventually tried again.] One day in August 2011, I woke up really early in the morning, and it was Ramadan, and I got ready for [my first day of community college]. I put my hijab on and I was wearing skinny jeans and a tank top with a little cardigan over it; [that outfit is] funny to me now. I didn't want anyone to see me. And I went to school, with the hijab. I didn't want anybody in my house to say anything, because I knew my mom would be happy with it. Oh my god. So I didn't say anything; I just left because I didn't want that reaction. And that was it. I was 18 years old. That's when I started wearing the hijab.

What I love about the hijab is being visibly Muslim; I love the interactions that I have with people, and I feel proud and happy. I want people to know that as a teacher, especially interacting with such young kids, I want them to remember: 'Oh my god, I remember I had a cool teacher or a nice teacher, and she had this thing on her head. She was Muslim.' I know they will hear the negativity that is out there associated with Islam. Maybe, one day, they'll stop and think, 'No, Muslims aren't like that.'

I really love the structure that Islam has, especially with the five pillars like praying five times a day. I think that the structure is so beautiful and necessary for us as human beings. We need it and, along with [Islam's] core beliefs. [In terms of the hijab,] I believe we're supposed to do it, but there's no compulsion in this religion. Personally, I felt a year before I put it on that I knew I wanted to wear the hijab. I was working towards it internally, and slowly started to buy more modest clothing and in preparation for it before I actually put it on. There's actually a lot of people who enjoy wearing it, appreciate wearing it, feel proud to wear it and are not forced to wear it."