

Zamire

Zamire Yueksel, 45, Software Test Engineer, Uyghur

“I grew up in the northwest part of China [that the Chinese] call Xinjiang. We [the Uyghurs] call it Eastern Turkistan. Because Xinjiang is a new territory, and the Chinese occupied us in 1949, like the Tibetans, we were raised as Chinese, culturally.

I wasn't exposed to Islam, growing up, nor did I search it myself. My husband and I were really good friends, we grew up together. We were classmates, starting from third grade upon finishing high school. He went to Kyrgyzstan and he was exposed to a lot of [religious texts,] books, and lectures, and then he became really religious. [When we were discussing marriage] after I finished school, he asked me ‘Do you believe in Allah?’ And I said, ‘I think I believe in Allah. I'm not sure. I believe that there is a Creator, but I don't know anything. I think I believe in Allah.’ [He told me that] he needed to be with someone religious, and I agreed, [on the condition] that I didn't want any pressure from [him] about praying or wearing the hijab.

When deciding where to live, my husband had just spent time in Kyrgyzstan, Central Asia, and I had just finished school [and thought] about going to graduate school in Beijing because I didn't want to go back to my region. Every time I would go back to my region, I would feel really depressed [because of the discrimination]. Discrimination is much lighter in the other parts of China because you are not the majority in the regions, and they will give you a better time than where we come from.

Slowly, I began to learn Islam once I got married. I started fasting and praying but inconsistently. I think it made a big difference because I got to see people live a different life. I began to see the beauty of the religion. I think Allah guided me somehow. When I came to the United States, I was ready to accept Islam [even more]. One of my cousins heavily influenced me; she was [also] in the Washington DC area [when I moved there for a job opportunity as an international broadcaster], and she was very devoted. She took me to the *masjid* (mosque) every Friday, and I was gradually learning. The more exposure I had, I began to think that wearing the hijab is the right thing, but I never had the courage to put the hijab on myself.

When I moved to California [and had to commute to my job on Interstate 405], I had a hard time staying awake driving to my job. The long commute would take [over an hour and a half each way], and my kids would be the last ones to be picked up from daycare. Because I became so tired, I just fell asleep completely while driving. [That was a wake up call] because what if I had died at that moment? How I was prepared to meet my Lord? I was always so close to wearing it multiple times, and I would always think, *I'm not ready. I'm not ready.* I decided to wear the hijab [shortly after this incident], in 2012.

[When people talk] about religion, they might argue that religion is not about the outside appearance, but more about what's in the heart. I tell them, ‘Yes, that's true. It's more about the heart. Many people can wear hijab, but maybe their heart is not as devoted as someone who doesn't wear hijab! [We don't judge, nor can we,] but we just do whatever we can to be close to Allah. If you decide that [the hijab] is not for you, that's your choice. However, I decided that I feel close and connected when I wear it.”