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# This Mom Is Showing People That Muslims Are Just Like Everyone Else

A Muslim woman battles prejudice one PowerPoint slide at a time.

By Kate Silver



Photo: Sam Comen



When Saadia Faruqi moved from Pakistan to America in 1998, she didn't expect to become a spokesperson for Muslims and Islam. But after 9/11, she was troubled by comments she'd heard or read online: "Take off your scarf—you're in America now." "The Quran teaches violence." "Do Pakistani people live in trees?" Faruqi, a grant writer at the time, began writing about Islam for

her local Houston paper and soon started leading stereotype-busting interfaith talks, first at her mosque, then at churches and synagogues. She discussed the tenets of Islam, shared insights on fasting and prayer, and opened up about life as a Muslim wife and mom. Word spread, and in 2011, Faruqi got a call from the Houston Police Department—the fifth largest in the country—inviting her to educate them as part of a yearlong training on cultural and religious sensitivity.

That's how the mother of two found herself nervously giving a PowerPoint presentation to about 100 officers in a police academy auditorium. "The first session was brutal. I really wasn't prepared to speak in front of a huge audience of type A personalities," says Faruqi. She kept at it, though, working with different groups of cops for three weeks out of the month, even creating a game called Spot the Muslim. "I wanted them to understand that you can't—and shouldn't—assume things about people from their appearance," she says. Faruqi also clarified details about Arabic, including the fact that the word *jihad* means "struggle," not "holy war," as many Americans believe. "A jihad is anything that's difficult but done for the sake of pleasing God," says Faruqi. "Its true meaning is such a positive thing."

Faruqi has since led training sessions for jail staff, high schoolers, teachers, colleges, and other police departments. While she's proud of her progress, some moments are deeply unsettling; she has cried in her car after being peppered with questions like "Why don't you go back to your own country if you don't want to assimilate?" But she persists. "What I'm doing right now," she says, "is my jihad."

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Published 08/28/2017

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