

Crowded childhood home bred passion for learning Arabic school founder first went to United States

BY EVA FERGUSON, CALGARY HERALD MARCH 19, 2012

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Erin Van Overloop, left, reads a story in Arabic with the help of her teacher, Sultan Kaddoura, at the Sultan Education Academy in Calgary.

Photograph by: Chantelle Kolesnik, Calgary Herald

CALGARY — A new Arabic school that's quickly gaining a foothold in Calgary grew out of one man's determination to build bridges between cultures.

Raised in a house filled with eight brothers, one sister and two parents, young Sultan Kaddoura learned quickly to survive on very little.

His parents worked hard — day and night in the restaurant business — after arriving here in the 1970s from Lebanon, doing whatever they could just to feed and clothe their nine kids.

But within the cramped and hectic lifestyle, sharing a bed with two brothers for much of his childhood, Kaddoura wasn't afforded a truly in-depth teaching of his Arabic mother tongue, his Middle-Eastern culture or his religion of Islam.

“When we were young, my brothers and I, our role models were whatever we saw on TV at the time — Bruce Lee and Scarface,” he said. “Other kids would call us Pakis. I would say to my brother ‘Are we Pakis?’ He’d say ‘No! We’re Arabs.’ ”

Once he graduated high school, Kaddoura was desperate to learn more about his background.

“Everyone always judged me, told me I was different. So I wanted to know how I was different, why was I so different, and what did it all mean.”

Taking odd jobs in lumber yards and burger shacks, Kaddoura would troll the city’s Islamic centres looking for answers and how he fit in.

He quickly discovered his command of the Arabic language was weak, and communicating with religious leaders was difficult.

He took the advice of one, who told him the best place to learn Arabic, and learn about Islam, was Philadelphia, an American hotbed of Muslim immigrants, and African-Americans converting to Islam at the time.

“When my Dad said goodbye, he said, ‘See you in two weeks.’ I was there for 10 years.”

Joining a local Arabic and Islamic centre, he worked alongside religious leaders. As he toiled to pick up the Arabic language, “it felt like I was learning Chinese. It was rough, but I kept trying. I didn’t quit.”

Soon he began teaching, too, starting with the alphabet to young children, then soon graduating to adults.

A decade later he found similar work in Arizona, and stayed on for another nine years, teaching Arabic at local Islamic centres and the federal prison system there.

In spite of all the time he invested inside the Muslim world, the outside was often unwelcoming.

In Arizona Kaddoura said he was harassed by authorities, questioned for no reason, often asked whether he had a pilot’s licence.

“They make their own rules, and they break them whenever they want” said Kaddoura, full of energy and passion as he sips Turkish coffee. “In America, it seems they want an enemy. And since 9/11 the Muslim is the enemy.”

Since arriving home again in Calgary two years ago, Kaddoura has worked to turn a misunderstanding of Islam and Arabs into a more moderate view of peace and generosity.

He’s since taken his lifetime of language and culture lessons to open what’s fast-becoming a popular Arabic language school for children and adults.

Tucked inside the upper floor of a restaurant strip near Scarboro, the warmly lit, tidy school is taking four times more students than when it first opened, beginning with just four students, and now

teaching more than 40.

After the Calgary Board of Education rejected an application last month to provide an Arabic bilingual program within the public system, Kaddoura hopes it will translate to more young students in his program.

But adults are also being drawn to Kaddoura's simple style of teaching.

As more Calgarians work and travel overseas to the Middle East and North Africa, more are wanting to learn Arabic.

Calgary's energy industry sees thousands of workers travelling to the Middle East every year.

While at the same time the city continues to welcome an influx of immigrants from those areas as new Canadians arrive in major centres like Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, but then quickly relocate in Calgary, where there are more jobs.

In spite of that, students say Calgary hadn't provided a high-quality, easy-to-learn, language program in Arabic, until Sultan Education was formed.

Erin Van Overloop is only one month away from completing her Level 1 Arabic at Sultan Education Academy.

An avid world traveller who's already been to the Middle East, she's planning another trip to North Africa, including Tunisia, Egypt and Morocco, at the end of this year.

"When you go to the Middle East, you are amazed at the openness, the kindness, the friendliness and the generosity of the people. It's not what's portrayed in the media at all. Instead, they are portrayed as extremist.

"But Sultan presents a better, more moderate version of Islam and the Arab world. It is balanced, never going to one extreme or the other."

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