

# DEVELOPMENT OF WEEKEND SCHOOL FOR REFUGEE CHILDREN IN TEXAS

By

Zohra Sunday - Director and Educator

Abdurrahman Sunday - Administrator and Educator

Rabia Sunday - Curriculum Coordinator and Educator

Halima Sunday - Event Coordinator and Educator

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## INTRODUCTION

Most Weekend Islamic Schools develop from, and are centered around the local masjid, and serve a heterogeneous population. We will now discuss the development of an Islamic school which has a different history, but has the same goal as all Islamic schools; to prepare our youth to be practicing Muslim citizens by providing them with the necessary knowledge and skills.

## ESTABLISHMENT

We heard about the existence of refugees from Bosnia, Somalia, Iraq and Kosovo, but had no contact with them. We had a lot of good clothing to give away and enquired at the mosque. We were told by the chairperson of the refugee committee (Ann-Marie) that they were all well seen to and did not require anything.

My father was with Sears carpeting when they were going to throw away good remnants of carpet pieces, about a thousand of them. We thought somebody could put it to good use, since the weather was already cooling down. But Ann-Marie told us the Kurdish families did not have use for it.

Allah guided us. We met a Kurdish girl working at a grocery store. When we asked her if she knew of anyone who might need good clothing and carpet pieces, she was so happy that she accompanied us to the apartment complex which was about a mile from our house and introduced us to many of these families. There were about 100 hundred Kurdish families living in the complex.

The American government had given them refuge in this country. They were given an apartment totally unfit for human habitation. Their rent was paid for three months, and some families received food stamps. Every apartment had a used sofa and a TV, but no beds, nor other furniture, and definitely no carpeting.

Each apartment had between six and ten children living in very small 2, 3 or 4 bedroom apartments. There were 2 and 3 families living in one apartment together so they could share the rent. So some apartments had between 14 and 20 people living together.

Their condition was appalling. Children were barefoot, and shivering from the cold, mothers were cutting meat on the naked wooden floor, children were urinating all over, there was no soap to wash them, not warm clothes in winter and very little food to eat. We could not sleep for two weeks, shocked at the condition of human beings living in a first world country surrounded by very wealthy Muslims who did not even know of their existence, nor did they care to know. We had to do something, but what? Our financial position was also not very good.

My mother, my sister Halima, and my father & I put all our efforts, time, money and whatever we could do to change their present condition. The next day my mother, my sister and I went to visit all the houses to find out how many people there were, and what their immediate needs were. We also informed Anne Marie of the situation, but she was unresponsive, so we began a food and clothing drive. We informed all our friends, colleagues, and acquaintances. Since it was almost Ramadan, we decided to prepare "Ramadan boxes" and present them to the families. We bought some household items (spoons, dishes, soaps etc.) from the dollar store. Then we bought dates and some meat and vegetables. My 4th grade students made placemats and Ramadan cards, then decorated and filled the Ramadan boxes.

It was the first day of Ramadan in 1996, a chilly winter's day. It started snowing as we arrived at the apartment complex with the Ramadan boxes and carpets. Some of my students came with to volunteer. We were immediately stampeded by all the children, wearing nothing but T-shirts and shorts, and within minutes everything was gone. Some parents of my 4th grade students came with their children and could not believe what their eyes saw. One parent put his hand in his pockets and gave me all the money, which was about \$500.

We continued the food drive, and when I took the food and clothing to the homes, I noticed that were always watching TV, even though it was Ramadan. I then said that this is the month of Ramadan, and asked why were they watching TV instead of reading the Holy Qur'an? The daughter replied that they did not know how to read the Holy Qur'an, and when I asked whether they were willing to learn if I taught them, they all said "Yes!" very enthusiastically.

We arranged to meet at this particular house and they notified the others. My mother went and first taught them about cleanliness and hygiene before teaching them how to read the Holy Qur'an and pray. By the third class, the little apartment was

overflowing, and we now realized that we had many children who wanted to learn, and we needed to provide them with a school. Fortunately, there was an apartment in this complex which was used for the five daily prayers by the elders of the Kurdish community. My father approached the Mullah to let us use it during non-prayer time. He allowed us this and my mother would spend several hours with these children. In a few months we were teaching between 70 and 80 girls and boys. Within six months it grew to a hundred and twenty children.

## CURRICULUM

Most of the children were born and grew up in refugee camps, and did not have opportunities to learn much. We had to therefore begin from the very basics, since the only thing the children knew about Islam was that their parents prayed, and sometimes fasted. In addition, the refugees were bombarded with anti-Muslim propaganda, which we had to address. We developed a comprehensive Islamic studies curriculum to address the academic, social, emotional, and spiritual needs of the Kurdish refugee children.

### Principles and Beliefs

These begin with the 7 Beliefs and 5 Pillars of Islam, with emphasis on importance and respect of our Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) and the Holy Qur'an, and the Hadith.

### Vocabulary

We soon realized that the Kurdish people had their own vocabulary for some Islamic words; such as 'nevish' for salah. In addition, they were being exposed to many concepts and terms for the first time, so the related vocabulary had to be taught directly.

### Basic duties

The foremost is cleanliness and modesty, followed by all aspects of salah. These include the prerequisites, conditions, times, method, and types of salah, and suras and duas required to perform salah. Topics related to salah include Adhan, salah in jamaat, Jummah khutbah, significance, and rewards and benefits of salah. Likewise, the prerequisites, conditions, procedure and types of saum are taught, with related duas and benefits. Duties to parents, teachers, neighbors, and community are also highlighted.

### The Holy Qur'an

Every Muslim is required to read the Holy Qur'an in Arabic, and memorize some suras to perform salah. Students begin by learning to recognize and pronounce the Arabic letters, then progress to spelling words accurately and fluently. They then read the Holy Qur'an, beginning with the first juz and ending with the 30th juz.

### Daily Life

This deals with the behavior and character of a Muslim in daily life, and daily duas. Topics include:

Waking up and sleeping

Eating and drinking

Dressing

Greeting

Behavior in the masjid

Development of virtues - honesty, perseverance, humility, courtesy, charity, etc.

Avoidance of vices - gossip, vulgar language, disrespect, etc.

Halaal and haraam

Respect for the environment and nature - no littering, no wasting of food and water, no vandalism, no destruction of plants, no injury to animals.

Being aware of their Islamic rights and responsibilities when interacting with

Non-Muslims, especially at schools.

### Important Muslims

The children first learn about the life of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), then the lives of other Prophets of Allah, from Adam (a.s) to Isa (a.s), the sahaba, tabieen, tabbe tabieen, and important Muslim women.

### Sacred and Historical Places

Students become familiar with the significance of cities, especially Mecca Mukarramah, Medina Munawwarah, and Jerusalem. Other cities include Baghdad, Damascus, Istanbul, Cordova, etc.

### Islamic Calendar and Current Events

The names of the Islamic months, sighting of the moon, important days (especially Ramadan, Eid-ul-Fitr and Eid-ul-Adha), and events are taught as they occur. Current events that directly impact the children's lives, or other Muslims' lives, are discussed.

### INSTRUCTION

The methods of instruction depend on factors such as ages of students, class size, resources, and subject matter. The children range in ages from 4 to 16 years, and initially we had close to 100 girls and boys, and hardly any resources.

We use predominantly whole-class instruction, with hands-on activities for teaching most aspects of the curriculum, but use a more individualized approach to teaching students how to read the Holy Qur'an.

Whole class instruction is used to teach Islamic principles and beliefs, important Muslims, sacred and historical places, and the Islamic calendar and current events. Basic duties and Islamic behavior are taught using field trips and social situations to model and demonstrate a Muslim's way of life.

The method of instruction for teaching the Holy Qur'an depends on the level of the

student. Initially, since the children were all at the same level, they were taught together, as one class. Once the children reach the second level (reading words), they begin receiving individualized instruction, which is more time-consuming. The younger children continue to receive group instruction, and the children who are taught individually practice their lessons while they are waiting for their turn. The students who read fluently and with close to 100% accuracy (third level) read the Holy Qur'an, and then become peer tutors of beginning students. Peer tutoring benefits both students; the advanced student reviews while teaching the beginning student, and the beginning student receives individualized attention.

## CHALLENGES AND SOLUTIONS

Every endeavor has challenges, and the establishment, development, and maintenance of the Kurdish school is no exception. In addition, each phase has its unique challenges.

The major obstacles we faced were financial and cultural. There were too many students crowded into one little room of an apartment, but we didn't have any other option, since we did not have any revenue. We could not charge the students fees, and what little donations we received, had to be used to provide for students' basic needs of food and clothing. A local madressa allowed us to use their facilities when they were not having classes, but transportation then became an issue.

Cultural impediments stemmed from the Muslim and especially the Non-Muslim communities. The cultural biases of the Kurdish people stemmed from their isolation from the rest of the Muslim community and ignorance of Islamic principles. They felt that it was unimportant for girls to receive Islamic education because they had more important responsibilities of taking care of the home. The Kurdish Mullah persuaded many parents that because we were Pakistani (which we are not), we did not know how to read the Holy Qur'an. This discouraged many children from coming to Islamic school. We then began educating the community about the importance of education for males and females, and once parents heard their children recite some short suras proficiently, they encouraged their children to come to the school. In addition, we decided to encourage the students by giving them a graduation party when they completed the qaida, and we asked some community members to present the graduating students with gifts.

We have at least one graduation a year, when we present each graduating student with a certificate of completion, and their personal copy of the Holy Qur'an. The students who complete reading the Holy Qur'an receive more gifts and certificates.

However, our real work was just beginning. There was a park across the road from the apartment complex, where the Kurdish children used to play. During the summertime, a group of people from some churches distributed free food to the children and tried to convert them to Christianity. Attendance rates dropped dramatically, so we contacted the churches and the Parks department to resolve this issue, and began to provide the children with food and entertainment on a regular basis. We began serving breakfast at school, and taking the children for picnics and field trips to show them that living the life of a Muslim is enjoyable. These activities provided us with many opportunities to teach and model Islamic behavior in various situations, and attendance was back to normal.

Christian missionaries used to go to the apartment complex and proselytize, engaging the children in spirited discussions. We immediately reinforced Islamic beliefs by

providing the students with references from the Holy Qur'an, having discussions, and role-playing possible scenarios. Within two weeks, the missionaries left, and many of the Kurdish children had developed stronger Islamic convictions.

Initially, discipline was an issue, since children thought it was not really a school. We then started taking attendance, and had conferences with parents, who were usually very supportive and grateful.

As we taught the children, we noticed that some children didn't learn well, and after a while we determined that many had vision problems. The parents were reluctant to have their eyes checked because they did not have medical insurance. By coordinating with a local madressa, my mother arranged for some students to receive free eye exams and glasses, and also went with them to the doctor.

## RESULTS AND ACHIEVEMENTS

The initial and most visible results are that students became aware of their identity as Muslims and faithfully perform their daily duties, such as praying, behaving as Muslims, and reading the Holy Qur'an. They are now able to deal effectively with peer pressure at school, and defend their religious convictions. They perform salah at school, encourage other Muslims, and make others aware of the beauty of Islam.

The Kurdish children are aware of, and appreciate what Muslims of other cultures do for them, and when the 9-11 tragedy happened, they felt it was their duty to give back to the community. We all got together and prayed for the victims and everyone. The Kurdish children arranged a garage sale and managed to raise more than \$1000.00 for Muslim victims. They also made condolence cards, and then Eid cards for some of the orphans. Now they continue with fundraising efforts for the tsunami victims.

## WHAT DO WE LEARN?

Imparting knowledge is not sufficient. The method of instruction and environment in which children are taught has a much greater effect. Using a holistic approach, teaching within context, and being role models teach students to apply the knowledge they have learnt. Hands-on experiences and field trips are educational and enjoyable. Older children can help plan and organize activities and events. Children should be encouraged to participate in volunteer activities for the Muslim and Non-Muslim community.

We should remember that modern-day children are under intense pressure to conform to un-Islamic principles and behavior. School personnel should provide a caring, supportive, and non-judgmental environment. On a regular basis, time should be devoted to discussion of issues that concern children, and staff should be trained to deal with them. Guest speakers from the community, like police officers and health-care professionals should be invited to speak to the children.

## CONCLUSION

It is the responsibility of the Muslim community to provide our youth with a strong

Islamic foundation of knowledge in a meaningful way and in a supportive environment, so that they may fulfill their Islamic obligations.