

Sophia Said

A Muslim by birth educated as an economist, Sophia Said's interfaith work began in the wake of 9/11. As director of the Interfaith Center, she organizes groups and gatherings that show people there are more similarities than differences in cultures.

CHEREE FRANCO

SPECIAL TO THE DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE
On July 13, the Obamas and the Bushes joined other mourners in a 7,600-seat sanctuary in Texas. They were there to honor Dallas police officers slain six days earlier, while working a march against police brutality.

At the same time, across the Texas-Arkansas line, another group gathered in a smaller church. Third-through fifth-graders, they were too young to worry about racism and terrorism, but they weren't too young to do the work of peacekeepers.

They pasted leaves on a banner, created an image of woven branches and symbolic "fruit" — a Star of David, an Islamic crescent, a cross, a nine-point Ba'hai star, a Buddhist wheel of life and a Hindu om. When they were done, the children's own silhouettes leapt, karate chopped and pumped fists beneath the tree in a variety of "superhero" poses. This tree is the logo for Friendship Camp, created by volunteers from six congregations and embodied by 34 Ba'hai, Jewish, Christian and Muslim kids.

"Every time that we hear anything about faith in the media, there are negative connotations," says Sophia Said, 42, director of the Interfaith Center. "This camp is an environment where kids can talk about their faith ... [and gain] confidence in who they are, but also in accepting others for who they are."

An economist by training and a Muslim by birth, Said's interfaith work began haphazardly — an intimate ripple among the tsunami of 9/11 backlash.

When she moved to Utah with her husband, Qayyim Said, in 1996, it was an easy transition from their native Pakistan. They felt conspicuous (Salt Lake City was 75 percent white) but comfortable among the Mormons, who share many of their values: a taboo against alcohol, a strong sense of modesty and a familial hierarchy that places the needs of the unit over those of the individual.

But when Said awoke on the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, two time zones behind the East Coast, she quickly understood that things had changed.

People started asking questions.

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Special to the Democrat-Gazette/DIXIE KNIGHT

"America values you as you are, as long as you are a contributing citizen and your values are not against freedom and progress and love You add flavor and texture."

Businessman's specialty is one-of-a-kind bow ties

For Jerald Mitchell of Little Rock, it all started out as a way to save money during his days as a business major at the University of Memphis.

A new member of Kappa Alpha Psi — a fraternity whose members are said to pride themselves on sharp dressing — Mitchell wanted to continue to dress well to boot.

"This is when I discovered the art of thrifting," he recalls. "I would go out to different thrift stores looking for gently-used blazers and ties." He got so good at styling his purchases, his fraternity fellows began seeking sartorial advice from him.

"I saw this as an opportunity

to create more income, so I gave it a shot."

The "shot" became 1297 Kustoms, an e-tailor service through which Mitchell offers bow ties for men and boys — self-tied, pretied and custom — in addition to a clothing-redesign service.

Mitchell began restyling blazers with the help of a Memphis seamstress; after returning to his hometown of Little Rock, he traveled back and forth between cities to maintain his business. "But I knew that eventually, I would have to learn how to sew on my own," he says. He went on to buy his first sewing machine, although he'd had no

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DRESSING ROOM



HELAINA WILLIAMS

Charity shrimp boil a hot ticket

LINDA S. HAYMES
ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE

For the past couple of years, Van Zbinden has been taking the heat and staying in hot water at his church.

And that's fine by him; his volunteer work with the annual shrimp boil fundraiser at St. Mark's Episcopal Church helps many in need through St. Francis House Ministries.

Three years ago, he was refilling diners' beverages at the annual fundraiser when he caught the eye of the volunteers cooking the shrimp, potatoes and corn. "They told me, 'Hey, I think you would fit in well coming to work over here with us,'" Zbinden, 40, recalls with a chuckle. And that's where he has been volunteering ever since. This year, he's leading the cooking team as chairman of the four-member cooking committee.

This year, the 12th-annual boil hosted by the church at 1000 N. Mississippi St. runs from 5 to 9 p.m., Sept. 24. Take-out meals will be sold with drive-through

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Arkansas Democrat-Gazette/JOHN SYKES JR.

Van Zbinden of Little Rock was refilling drinks at St. Mark's Episcopal Church's annual shrimp boil fundraiser three years ago when he was called up to be a cook. This year, he's chairman of the cooking team for the Sept. 24 event that benefits St. Francis House Ministries.

Said

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They wanted to know what Muslims believe, what the Koran says about violence, if Said understood what had happened.

As she dressed for the mosque a few days later, her husband suggested that she wait till she was inside to cover her head.

"In the post-9/11 world, we were taught in our families to be quieter, more invisible. Lots of women who were wearing headscarves took them off," Said says.

Growing up in a country created as a haven for the subcontinent's Muslims, Said's faith was a given. Nearly every conversation included at least one "inshAllah" (God-willing), restaurants closed during Ramadan and public buildings were equipped with prayer rooms. But Said had never worn a hijab full time, and while she was devout, her faith wasn't particularly deep.

As she struggled to process the attacks, she began to read more about Islam. Her community's curiosity prompted her to organize informal question-and-answer sessions in local churches.

"I thought we needed to tell people who we are, that we're not a threat," she says.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

When Said's paternal grandmother was a young woman, the British Indian Empire divided into two independent nations. Aziz Begum was one of 14 million people who relocated from India to the newly created Pakistan, or vice versa, in what became the largest migration in human history.

In 1946, the year before the split, thousands of Hindus and Muslims died in clashes. The overall Partition death toll has been estimated at between 200,000 and a million, and academics call the situation a "mutual genocide." Some 75,000 women are thought to have been raped, and documented horrors include fetuses cut out of wombs, infants slammed against walls and dismembered corpses.

Late at night, Begum would whisper waking nightmares to the granddaughter who shared her bedroom. In one story, Begum brandishes a gun to hold off Hindu men, who are trying to attack women on her refugee train.

But by day 1980s Pakistan seemed pacific to Said, who spent long afternoons scrambling up mango trees and playing cricket in her yard. Her teammates were her brothers and a revolving crew of rural cousins, who often stayed with them while studying in Lahore. Her father's position with the Ministry of Tourism came with vacations in the northern mountains where, before 2001, the glacial rivers and some of the world's tallest peaks attracted tens of thousands of foreigners a year.

"My family is liberal ... within the boundaries of the culture," Said says.

Her father taught his teenage daughter to drive and celebrated when, after high school, she was accepted into Kinnaird, a Catholic women's college and one of the best schools in Pakistan. After college Said expected to study in America like her paternal uncles. Instead, her parents started looking for her husband.

'A FORM OF REBELLION'

The Saids' son, Azkya, 21, studies biology at the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville and their daughter,



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"What I've learned from Sophia, ultimately, it's love for people that is the strongest force," Qayyim Said says of his wife.

Shahnur, 18, just started her freshmen year at Barnard College in New York. When Said and her husband refused to let Shahnur sleep at friends' houses (Pakistani parents are protective of daughters), she protested as loudly as any other American kid.

Their children will likely find their own spouses, but the Saids do expect to have input. Said hopes one day Shahnur will wear a headscarf, but they've never talked about it. "I started covering at 35, out of my own choice. It has to come from her," Said says.

In 2009, exhausted from the 9/11 fallout, Said started covering routinely. She sees it as "a form of rebellion."

"I am Muslim, so why hide that?" Rather than a melting pot, Said — who has been an American citizen since 2012 — calls America "a salad bowl."

"America values you as you are, as long as you are a contributing citizen and your values are not against freedom and progress and love ... You add flavor and texture," she says.

But even now, Qayyim Said is sometimes uncomfortable with his wife's hijab. "If someone had never met Sophia, and they've known me for a long time, that person might be a little surprised — his wife wears the hijab?"

Said's first glimpse of her fiancée was across an event hall, surrounded by his family, the night before their wedding. He was a graduate economics student in England and had been back for less

than 24 hours. It was henna night — a tradition in which a bride-to-be's hands and feet are tattooed — with dancing, singing and friends. Said, 20, was too distracted to wonder about the stranger among strangers.

The couple didn't have a true conversation until the next night, when they were alone in a bedroom at Qayyim Said's parents' house. Once they started talking, they didn't stop for days.

"We talked about friends, college, culture and politics. We talked about everything. We didn't know anything," Said says.

For Qayyim Said, the bond was immediate. "You're supposed to be a little shy and reserved. Sophia was behaving the way she was supposed to, by the culture, but she handled herself confidently... She was loving and affectionate, right from the word go."

Two weeks into their marriage, he left alone, for England, to finish his thesis. A few months later Said joined her husband in a third country — America.

MUSLIM VISIBILITY

Friend Shazia Feizi remembers watching Said, who had the highest GPA among economics majors, speak at the University of Utah commencement. "Seeing a woman out there, from our own faith, dressed in our traditional dress — showing that to my girls was like, look, this is what you can do," she says.

In Utah, "some of the [Muslim] teenagers were totally not able to fit in and were getting into stuff which

they shouldn't get into," Said says. With support from their local council, she and Feizi started five Girl Scout troops for Muslims, to provide "fellowship, fun and community but most importantly, leadership skills."

One Somali teen earned her Gold Award — the highest honor in Girl Scouts — by helping a new immigrant family find housing, figure out bus schedules and register kids for school.

In 2007, after Said had completed her second bachelor's degree and her husband had completed his doctorate, they moved to Little Rock so Qayyim Said could teach health economics at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences.

At their new mosque, the Saids met doctors, engineers and lawyers. It was a different Muslim community from Salt Lake City, which had many Serbian and Somali refugees. But it didn't take long for Said to realize that the acculturated Arkansas Muslims face their own challenges.

In 2009, as the family lounged after dinner, Shahnur said, "Mom, today a kid called Azkya a terrorist."

Alarmed, Said asked her 14-year-old son, "What did you do about it?"

Embarrassed, Azkya said, "No, Mom, nothing, forget about it. People just call Muslim kids terrorists."

Other Muslim kids had their lunches stolen and one was routinely taunted as "the daughter of Osama Bin Laden." Finally, adults got involved, but not in the way Said had hoped. Following

SELF PORTRAIT

Sophia Said

■ **FAMILY:** husband Qayyim Said and children Azkya Said and Shahnur Fatima Said

■ **DATE AND PLACE OF BIRTH:** Oct. 9, 1973, Lahore, Pakistan

■ **MY FAVORITE PLACE IN MY HOUSE IS** my prayer mat. It's not a place, it's a space I create for myself. I like to just spend time there meditating or reflecting or reading a book.

■ **ALWAYS IN MY FRIDGE:** strawberry jam

■ **I'M CURRENTLY (RE)READING** *No god but God: The Origins, Evolution and Future of Islam* by Reza Aslan.

■ **ONE OF MY FAVORITE BOOKS IS** *The Conference of the Birds*, by 12th-century Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar.

■ **MY FAVORITE SEASON IS** fall — all the beautiful colors and leaves and the calm and the quiet of the air and the space.

■ **I'M CURRENTLY WATCHING** *Nikita* (on Netflix).

■ **ONE THING PEOPLE DON'T KNOW ABOUT ME** is that I am so much into vampire TV shows.

■ **A FUN FACT ABOUT ME:** I'm one of the producers of *Marjoun and the Flying Headscarf* (a movie shot in Little Rock in May about a Pakistani-American teenage motorcyclist who wears a hijab).

■ **ONE WORD TO SUM ME UP:** egalitarian

parent and teacher protests, Sheridan High School canceled a Muslim speaker, slated to discuss peace on Sept. 11, 2013.

Said couldn't "forget about it." She organized a coalition of parents to go to eight area schools and talk with administrators.

Since 2010, Said had been rallying Muslims to buy tables at charity events, sponsor teams at nonprofit walks and participate in service projects at places like Our House and the Arkansas Food Bank.

"You have to contribute with your time and effort and money ... to not only Muslim causes but causes of diversity and inclusion and charity," she says.

In 2015, she was named Peacemaker of the Year by the Arkansas Coalition for Peace and Justice, and earlier this year, Said was presented with Just Communities of Arkansas' Humanitarian Award. She was one of the award's youngest recipients in 53 years.

"What I've learned from Sophia, ultimately, it's love for people that is the strongest force," Qayyim Said says.

LOVE THY NEIGHBOR

On Sept. 11, 2015, Shahnur Said and Patricia Williams, both high school juniors, faced 400 people in the packed sanctuary of St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Shahnur has dark hair, brown skin and wore a flowing, eastern top. Patricia, a former missionary kid who attends Fellowship Bible Church, has red hair and fair skin and wore a sleeveless dress.

Patricia told the crowd that she bonded with Shahnur when they were supposed to work on an eighth-grade talent show but that they "got so wrapped up in each other," they "forgot to do the talent show."

Their relationship became a blur of *Vampire Diaries*, henna, swimming and once, an ill-fated ear-piercing experiment. But as their friendship grew, their cultural differences caused friction. At her birthday party, Patricia ordered meat-heavy meals for the table, even though she knew that Shahnur only eats halal. Another time, she had to wrap her shorts-clad legs in a beach towel and "scuttle up to Shahnur's room," when her friend's grandfather was visiting.

"The more differences we noticed, the more questions we started to ask. And the

more questions we started to ask, the more we started to ... let go of some of the fear and prejudices," Patricia says.

The night's theme was Love Thy Neighbor, and the talk was nestled between music from different faith traditions and religious leaders asking forgiveness for atrocities committed in the name of their faiths.

Patricia and Shahnur didn't want religion to become a division.

"Sophia's activities have had a huge impact on our children, the way they've grown up seeing their mother be accepting of other communities," Qayyim Said says.

So Shahnur spent Easter with Patricia's family and Patricia attended services at the mosque. Now the teenagers discuss their faiths openly and often.

"What I learned from my journey with Patricia is, really beautiful things can happen when you let go of your fears. Like for me, I found my best friend," Shahnur concludes.

This year's September service is the fifth sponsored by the Interfaith Center. Love Thy Neighbor: Moving From Darkness to Light will be held at 6 p.m. Thursday at St. Mark's, 1000 N. Mississippi St. "When Sept. 11 comes, it's a day of patriotism and nationalism, but it's also a day when people's fears and anxieties are heightened ... I thought, why don't we give people a platform and a venue on that day, where they can all come together?" Said says.

There's also an interfaith youth group (co-founded when Said was a graduate student at the Clinton School for Public Service, before she knew about the Center), an interfaith supper club, multiple events for Arkansas Peace Week and a four-week Christian/Muslim dialogue hosted by churches and civic groups. And this year, for the first time, there is Friendship Camp.

Friendship campers discuss "how all the faiths are different, but also how they're similar because we share the same 'superhero' virtues — compassion, patience, wisdom, honor, courage," Said says. She was impressed with the participants' innate ability to celebrate multiplicity.

"With adults we are working to reduce stereotypes. These kids ... see the differences, but they don't take the differences as something negative. In fact, we are learning from them."

Add khaki suit to wardrobe for less formal, versatile look

Q. I was in the men's section last weekend and wished I had you on speed-dial. There was a very nice tan suit on sale in my size that I thought would be a good addition to the few I have. I tried it on and thought it looked good but wasn't sure about whether it was traditional enough and if so, with Labor Day coming up, if I'd have to wait until next June to wear it. I took the risk and bought it. Was that a good idea?

FYI, my work is traveling rep. (quasi sales) for a software company where the situation may dictate either a nice shirt, a shirt and tie, or a suit for meeting upper management. Thanks.

A. Yes, it was a good idea.

MALE CALL



LOIS FENTON

Still, I understand your concern about the seasonal rules for clothes. While we've all heard that wearing white, or seersucker, or straw hats before Memorial Day or after Labor Day is practically a sin, the rules are more flexible these days. Besides, the answers to seasonal clothing questions also depend a lot on geography.

Wherever you go in the United States, men who are

at the top dress pretty much the same way. They buy expensive clothes, their accessories are impeccable, and they enjoy looking good. At the same time, there are differences. Late summer weather in southern California or the Deep South dictates somewhat different choices from what you'd wear in New Jersey or Massachusetts. If you are in an area where the temperature stays sultry well into September or is warm year-round, you certainly needn't change your entire wardrobe or stop wearing summerlike items exactly on Sept. 5.

Several methods can help you make a smooth transition from one season to the next. One is wearing fewer pastel shades and more dark, earth colors; another is changing the

fabrics you wear from mostly cotton to an emphasis on lightweight wools. The one item in a man's wardrobe that fits this time of year perfectly is a khaki suit (any color in the light brown family such as tan, light or dark khaki, or olive, qualifies as "a khaki suit").

Khaki suit time depends more on the temperature than on the calendar. Not only is khaki a welcome departure that breaks up the monotony of men's blue and gray wardrobes, but it also spans the seasons beautifully. A khaki suit is a relaxed choice for men who want to look well dressed even after business hours. A flattering look that fits all but the most dressy occasions, it strikes that happy note of "dressed," but not too dressy.

Still, you don't have to treat it as casual attire. You can wear it with or without a tie, and with or without a pocket square. To distinguish the suit's trousers from a pair of chinos, have them cuffed. And even though the color is in the brown family, a khaki suit works with either dark brown or black shoes. With brown, the look is a bit more casual; with black, it is dressier.

A cotton khaki suit is lighter in weight and more versatile than the wool version. It's a perfect blank canvas for all manner of shirts and ties. Oddly, it works with just about every color shirt and tie that you would choose for a blue or gray suit, plus a few more. The most traditional and most formal look is a khaki suit, white shirt and dark quiet tie.

Other great looks with khaki are blue shirts, pink shirts, yellow shirts, striped shirts, and small gingham checks. In addition, a khaki suit looks great with some oddball colors that would not pair up so well with your darker, more formal wool suits. For example, a lavender shirt or an orange tie could mix nicely with your khaki suit ... but not a lavender shirt and an orange tie.

Incidentally, I'm glad you thought of contacting me while you were shopping. My email is below. I can't guarantee I'll respond while you're still in a store, but you'll generally hear back soon.

Send men's fashion queries to lois.fenton@prodigy.net