

Carrying the spirit of Ramadan throughout the year

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By GARY SOULSMAN

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Muslims begin the holy month of Ramadan this week with a sense of expectation and excitement.

For Dr. **Sheerin Javed**, of Landenberg, Pa., it's when worship feels most alive. For her husband, Dr. Hummayun Ismail, it's a month of sacrifice and seeking mercy.

For their friend, Noreen Chohan of Philadelphia, the soul of the month is to strengthen her connection to Allah.

"We follow in the footsteps of Mohammed in many ways," says Chohan, referring to the prophet asking all Muslims to fast one month a year.

There's an intensity that comes from devoting oneself to fasting and prayer as the prophet did. And adults, who are healthy enough to go without food and water during the day, often say that they deepen their awareness of the sacredness of life.

"It's important to extend yourself at this time," says Chohan. "We believe with any good deed the rewards are amplified."

Many Muslims give two percent of their savings to the poor, if they can, says Ismail. But whatever people give, the bottom line is to remember those who are less fortunate.

So this group of friends are donating to the Ministry of Caring's Emmanuel Dining Rooms, which serve the needy, and they are planning to serve one of the meals.

It's also important for **Javed** to do something that goes beyond Ramadan. This year she put that commitment into the founding of Circle of Hands with Chohan.

It's an outreach of Muslim women to show their commitment to America through interfaith dialogue, charity, education, cultural events and socializing. In the last few months, Circle of Hands has held events, such as hikes, picnics and seminars. More are on the way.

Javed is a rheumatologist, her husband a specialist in pulmonary conditions and sleep disorders. Each month the Circle of Hands hosts a free medical seminar. The couple have recruited colleagues for the talks.

These are held at 12:30 p.m. the second Thursday of the month at the Hockessin Public Library, 1023 Valley Road.

The next will be on Sept 11. The topic: "Screening Mammogram and Bone Densitometry: What Every Woman Should Know." The speaker will be Dr. Mohammad I. Haq, a specialist in internal medicine.

Circle of Hands also is exploring ways to begin a free part-time clinic to help people without health insurance.

And this May, Circle of Hands held a cultural event at Longwood Gardens, showcasing the fashion and jewelry of Pakistani-Americans.

"We want to build bridges between communities by showing what's best in the East," says **Javed**.

Javed has seen too many one-dimensional portrayals of Islam in the media. So Circle of Hands is working to counteract those.

One is that Muslim-Americans are not interested in art and culture, says Chohan, an interior designer. She knows otherwise, owning Design Effects Interior Design Studio. (She is also

an event planner.)

The Longwood fundraiser brought together people of many faiths and raised more than \$12,000. Twenty percent will go to sponsor an interfaith dialogue early next year, moderated by Muqtedar Khan, an associate professor of international relations at the University of Delaware.

The rest of the earnings have been given to the Central Asian Institute, which educates children in remote regions of northern Pakistan and Afghanistan.

The institute was launched by Greg Mortenson, who wrote the popular book "Three Cups of Tea" about a failed 1993 attempt to climb K2 in Pakistan. During the descent, he met parents and children in the region and learned of the need for better schools.

Today his goal is "to counteract extremism and terrorism by building schools -- especially for girls -- throughout the breeding ground of the Taliban," he writes. As a result of his efforts, more than 24,000 students have teachers and classrooms.

Education is important to give parents the confidence to care for the children and the means to earn a living, says Circle of Hands co-founder **Javed**. The new schools also provide guidance that helps future parents resist propaganda.

"We met Greg at West Chester University when he came to speak and found him to be very dynamic and committed," she says.

"He's doing what many people only think of doing," says **Javed's** husband, Ismail. And it's work that Circle of Hands believes to be vital.

"It's so easy to brainwash and blackmail people in the name of religion when they don't have education," says group co-founder Chohan.

Circle of Hands is planning a second big cultural event at the end of Ramadan, when Muslims are in a festive mood. For this Oct. 19 celebration -- known as Eid al-Fitr -- there will an afternoon of food, music and comedy at the Rose Garden Ballroom of the Park Hyatt Philadelphia at the Bellevue, 200 S. Broad St.

Musicians include the highly regarded Pakistani singer Habib Wali Mohammad; instrumentalist Ustad Shafaatullah Khan, who plays sitar and tabla; and singers Nadeem Wali Mohammad and Noreen Chohan.

Comedian Dan Nainan, who is half Indian and Japanese, will be master of ceremonies. But before Eid there is Ramadan. And for **Javed**, Ismail and Chohan there is a connectedness in fasting as part of a world community -- Ummah. This connectedness reminds them of the equality of people before Allah.

They are grateful for the month, even though going without food and water during working hours can make one irritable. **Javed** reminds herself to not let irritation run away with her when speaking to her children before breaking the fast.

"Ramadan is a lesson in patience," she says.

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FYI

Circle of Hands (www.circleofhands.usa.org) encourages discussions between different faith and cultural communities, plans family activities and cultural events, and hosts medical and religious seminars. Serving on the advisory committee are Dr. Hummayun Ismail, Sid Sharma and Muqtedar Khan.

For Eid al-Fitr, a festive time at the end of Ramadan, there will an afternoon of food, music and comedy at the Rose Garden Ballroom of the Park Hyatt Philadelphia at the Bellevue, 200 S. Broad St., Philadelphia. The date is Oct. 19, from noon to 5:30 p.m. Admission is

\$90; \$120 for the front two tables. Call 275-8024 or e-mail info@circleofhandsusa.org.