

Civic Minded: Women on Wednesdays: Growing Up Muslim in Rochester

My first thought leaving the Women on Wednesdays: Growing Up Muslim in Rochester event was – they could have charged money for that. Women on Wednesdays is a free event, but the production of this most recent discussion was of such great caliber, I felt like I was getting a steal of a deal by getting to experience it for free. The undeniable talent and poise of the panel and poetry readers along with the continued message of peace and hope made this session stand above and beyond my expectations.

The evening was held in the “Black Box” theatre where the energized crowd filled all the seats and overflowed into the aisles and against the walls. Such a diverse, uplifting, and positive crowd like the one I saw last week is enough to make your heart smile.

The evening began with several of the most well-performed poetry readings I have ever had the pleasure of witnessing. These women spoke with such confidence and emotion that I thought I was attending a stage performance at the theatre. The poetry was deep, from the heart, personal, and thought provoking. The raw emotion of the readings forced me to be a better listener and therefore, gain another perspective. While these women have struggled in ways different than me (racism, immigration, and the ignorance of others), I found several of the topics addressed in the poetry to be very relatable including finding acceptance, feelings of depression wanting to hurt yourself, feelings of loneliness, and self-discovery. I experienced much of these same thoughts and feelings in my youth and can only imagine how those feelings are magnified when you are also battling with discrimination and hate.

The opening poetry readings were followed by the panel speaker presentations. Each shared a story about his or her unique heritage and experiences growing up as a Muslim in Rochester. While several of the stories shared made me wince in shame in regards to the behaviors of some members of our community, a lot of the shared experiences remained positive and hopeful. The general theme among the panel seemed to be that while they had been hurt in the past, maybe by ignorant words or immaturity among peers and adults, they were still willing to forgive and teach in order to help others, including myself, to better understand and appreciate their unique realities, journeys, and insights.

The panel presentations were followed by a brief question and answer session with the audience. Several audience members and panelists discussed the appropriate way to perhaps ask questions and learn more about the Muslim culture without being rude or insensitive. Several questions relating to the hijab, family and home life, and specifics about Islam were also fielded by the panel. The evening then closed with another round of fantastic poetry readings.

As I walked out of the theatre last Wednesday, I thought a lot about my own ignorance about Islam and the Muslim culture. In that short session, I gained more insight than I had in the past several years living among the Muslim community here in Rochester because I had made a conscious effort to try to learn more. I hope to continue to learn and understand more. With this knowledge, I plan to become a better advocate and strive to eliminate discrimination in our thriving community. As a

whole, Rochester seems ahead of the curve in regards to acceptance and inclusion; but we still have a lot of work to do.