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## Ready for Ramadan

*slims dedicate month to fasting, piety, reflection*

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BY JENNIFER WILLIS

The Portland Tribune Sep 25, 2006

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**Against a backdrop of  
tinued religious  
understanding,  
Muslims around the world  
are preparing for  
Ramadan, the month of  
fasting and reflection.**



JIM CLARK / PORTLAND TRIBUNE

At the Muslim Educational Trust in Tigard on Thursday, students listen to a lesson on Ramadan from trust Executive Director Wajdi Said.

With five mosques and a number of prayer centers and Portland, leaders at the Bilal Mosque in Beaverton estimate there are more than 10,000 Muslims in the Portland metro area.

“Fasting is prescribed for every healthy adult and is observed for the entire month from sunrise to sunset,” Portland Muslim Mona Mayfield says. “During Ramadan, we must abstain from food, water, anger, cursing and marital relations.”

Ramadan is the ninth month of the Islamic calendar, and is celebrated from new moon to new moon. Since the Islamic calendar is lunar, the dates of the monthlong fast change from one year to the next. This year, Ramadan began Saturday and runs until Oct. 23.

“Every Muslim performs the fast in exactly the same way,” says Shahriar Ahmed, president of the Bilal Mosque Association. “We get up before sunrise,

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eat something very little, finish our morning prayer and then come in to work. In the evening we'll break it — it should be a light meal, but typically we will end up splurging a bit."

"We believe that the Quran started to be revealed to the Prophet via Gabriel in this month," says Mohammed Haque, Bilal's interfaith coordinator. "So people put extra emphasis on the piety. There's no lying, no cheating, no shouting. At the end of the day, you feel good."

In addition to the five daily prayers, there is a special evening prayer during Ramadan. The prayer can be done at home or at the mosque. By the end of Ramadan, "the person leading the prayer at the mosque will have recited the Quran in Arabic from beginning to end, from memory," Ahmed says.

While fasting is not required for young children or those for whom it is contraindicated (e.g., diabetics, pregnant women), this month is about more than forgoing food and water.

"The eating and no drinking part is the easiest," Ahmed says. "The challenge is, you're supposed to be the ideal Muslim. Whatever you learn, life changes that you make, you're supposed to roll it over for the rest of the year."

"Normally, you drive fast, you send e-mails putting down somebody. That's part of life here, right?" Haque says. "I shouldn't do it normally, but this month, I have a constant reminder. I'm hungry, I'm thirsty. I am sacrificing for achieving something higher.

"Some people go and do social work, just to commemorate Ramadan," Haque says. "We will go to Habitat for Humanity during Ramadan. I really enjoy it, doing for someone I don't know. I'm doing it just for the goodness of it."

#### Difficult questions welcomed

Five years after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, Islam is not well-understood in the United States. Even with outreach efforts to educate non-Muslims about Islam, many Americans struggle with prejudices against a faith that has gained notoriety through the acts of a small group of fundamentalists.

"Islam is not a threat. It is a religion which has contributed a great deal to the world," says Mayfield, who was born in the United States and went to public school. "It is a religion which recognizes different peoples, religions and is extremely diverse."

In a country that is largely Christian, many Americans don't realize that Christianity, Judaism and Islam share a common heritage, tracing their respective lineages to the same biblical figure, Abraham.

Bilal Mosque holds an open house each year on the Sept. 11 anniversary. Beaverton resident Betty Merritt stopped by to show support, after volunteering the previous day with the annual Walk for Unity, celebrating diversity in Washington County.

Merritt wants to learn more about Islam but isn't sure where to start. "I guess I'm too ignorant to even know what the questions are," she says.

Ahmed reassures her: "The more difficult the questions, the better."

"When events like 9/11 happen, it is very normal for any society which has been so wronged, that you expect the average person to put on a 9/11 glass and look at Muslims," he says. "Would it have been better if it had been otherwise? Yes. But it is very normal, and we need to understand and appreciate it."

There aren't nearly as many mosques in Portland as in Ahmed's native

Bangladesh, and much of the American Muslim community's focus has been on passing Islam to its children, rather than on outreach.

"We never engage with the average non-Muslim on a religious basis," Ahmed says. "We forgot that we had to teach our neighbors who we are. It has forced us to come out of our shells. And, God willing, it's been working. Much of the misconception is because of our fault as well, that we didn't engage."

"Sometimes the media is throwing a lot of, 'They're all Islamic fundamentalists who are out to kill us,'" Merritt says. "I don't believe that's the truth." She regards Muslims as "just like all the rest of us, who want a better life for their kids, want peace, want to live healthily."

"I actually did work with a couple of people who observed Ramadan," Merritt says. "They were very open with me to inform me, 'This is what we're doing with fasting, and this is why.'"

Although some people might be intimidated by a monthlong fast, Muslims look forward to it.

"The ideal belief in God is something that we all aspire toward," Ahmed says. "This month gives us a traditional means of reaching His closeness."

"It is truly special," Mayfield says. "The family is together more, we all take time out to eat together, pray together and enjoy one another's company. It's a time to reflect and give thanks to God."

"It becomes very festive," Ahmed says. "Our kids are these red-blooded kids, like any average American kid. But they fast. They want to do it with us. We all become very sad when the month is starting to end. It peaks with a celebration, but you think, 'Oh, this month's gone again.'"

### **'This is our walk'**

As Ramadan comes to a close, Muslims gather outdoors for an early morning congregational prayer, followed by a feast. Adults typically take the day off from work, and children stay home from school. "We'll just move from house to house to house, and there is a lot of food," Ahmed says.

Gift-giving is also traditional. "We visit homes of those less fortunate to deliver gifts to the children," Mayfield says.

What is it like to be an American Muslim? "It is absolutely great!" Bilal's Haque says. "I immensely enjoy the discourse Muslim Americans are having with other Americans and within themselves. This has been long overdue."

"I've never felt more proud as an American than I have in the last five years," Ahmed says. "You know why? One example is you. Did you have to come and meet us today? Did you have to get into as much details and have as much respect and perspective? The answer is no. That's what's making this journey very meaningful. This is our walk. Lewis and Clark had their day, and this is our walk."

"It feels important to think outside of my own cultural box and try to understand where people are coming from," Merritt says. "Once in a while, you'll read something that's just a jaw-dropping reminder that's so awful, so stereotypical, so unfounded in anything that's reality. You forget that some people really do think this."

"We need to go deeper," Haque says. "Do the evangelical Christians represent Christianity? I don't think so. Does Osama bin Laden represent Islam? I don't think so. We need to come to that conclusion, and solve the rest of the puzzle."

### **To learn more**

For information on Islam and to connect with Muslims in your community, contact:

- Muslim Community Center of Portland, 3801 N.E. Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd., 503-281-7691
- Ahmadiyya Movement in Islam/Portland, Rizwan Mosque, 9925 S.W. 35th Drive, 503-246-0813, [www.alislam.org](http://www.alislam.org)
- Islamic Center of Portland, 6940 S.W. Hall Blvd., Beaverton, 503-526-9305, [www.icop.org](http://www.icop.org)
- Muslim Educational Trust, 10330 S.W. Scholls Ferry Road, Tigard, 503-579-6621, [www.metpdx.org](http://www.metpdx.org)
- Bilal Mosque Association, 4115 S.W. 160th Ave., Beaverton, [www.bilalmasjid.com](http://www.bilalmasjid.com), 503-591-7233,

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