

Initiatives of Change Conference:

"AUSTRALIA AS A NEIGHBOUR"

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Session: "Healing journeys", 14 January 2007

Sherene Hassan (transcript of DVD presentation):

I think a turning point in my life was September 11. I remember watching the events unfold on TV and feeling incredible devastation at the loss of innocent lives. What really affected me was the reaction of my eldest son - we have four children - and my eldest son just said: "How can a Muslim do such a thing?"

We have brought our children up according to Islamic teaching that every creation of God is a sacred thing. We don't even kill spiders in our home. We put them in a jar and take them outside. So for us to see the loss of life in the name of our religion was the most gut-wrenching event to deal with.

I think the backlash against the Muslim community was quite severe. We lived in Adelaide at the time. It was more severe than in Melbourne. Muslim women were advised to stay home and only go out with a male chaperone. I stayed home for three days, which is the longest I have ever stayed home in my life. But I went out. If I had gone to the local shops I would have been fine because they know me there. But I had to venture to a part of Adelaide where they have never seen a Muslim before and it was quite awful. The Coles check-out lady swiped the card through and shoved it in my face with a scowl, one man had to be restrained from spitting at me by his wife, one hoon sat in his car revving the engine mockingly pretended to hit me as I crossed the road.

I came home and fell apart and the first thing I thought of doing was not wearing my headscarf. I didn't want to be identified as a Muslim. Then my husband, who was brought up in England and then in Bendigo and has a dinky-die Aussie accent - he is an eye doctor - had patients who didn't want to see him. He has dark, curly hair, dark skin and a big Egyptian nose and Dr Hassan on the door. What is my husband going to do? Do a Michael Jackson, have plastic surgery! That is not an option. I thought long and hard and prayed more than I had ever prayed in my life. I decided to write a letter to the newspaper, and writing that letter was extremely therapeutic. I will share that letter with you:

"I am an Australian Muslim who is experiencing immense grief and sadness at the senseless loss of innocent lives. When I heard about the terrorist attack in the US I felt as if a member of my family had been killed. I am also devastated that I am no longer treated as a fellow Australian. I love this country. I was born here and have always tried to be an upright citizen. It is tragic that I am being punished because of the acts of a few evil individuals. I assure you that nothing in the Koran supports their actions. On the contrary it is a heinous crime against humanity."

Writing that letter was extremely therapeutic and I was delighted that 3 newspapers actually *The Advertiser*, *The Age* and *The Australian* all published it. I felt my views were getting out to the wider community.

But what was life-changing was a letter that I received from a couple who live in Eden Hills

in South Australia. This couple went to the trouble of writing a letter to me and sending it to the editor of *The Advertiser* and the editor then sent it on to me. Unfortunately I have misplaced that letter, but the premise of that letter is basically saying they were extremely saddened to read my letter in the newspaper and they just wanted to write to express their solidarity and support for the Muslim community. I can't tell you the effect that that letter had on my life. It was almost like me being lifeless and that letter brought me back to life.

It was several weeks later that I went to the Muslim Women's Association and the lady there gave me a pile of letters that thick - beautiful supportive letters written by Australians from all walks of life - some from church organizations, some from non church organizations, all trying to reach out to the Muslim community. My job was to reach out to those beautiful supportive letters, so that whenever I went out and encountered some kind of nastiness, I would come home and immerse myself in those supportive letters and it made all the hurt go away. It made me realize that the overwhelming majority of Australians are beautiful people.

It was definitely a point of healing for me and I can honestly say I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for those beautiful people who reached out to me and transformed my life. Now, since that time, instead of going back to teaching, I have decided to dedicate my life to bridging the gap between Muslim and non-Muslim. That is what brings me here today.

***Sherene Hassan** is Secretary of the Executive Committee of the Islamic Council of Victoria.*