

Building the Bridge



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 To find out more about Building the Bridge please contact Ian Quaife on 0117 9036413.
 Many thanks to Southwark Council and partners, whose community photography project, Peace by Piece was an inspiration for this exhibition.


Building the bridge













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Foreword

This is a wonderful exhibition. The vivid portraits and words of the individuals featured provide a glimpse of the colour, energy and diversity of Bristol's Muslim community. There are Africans, Asians, Arabs and Europeans. There are different sects, cultures and languages.

Succinct, vibrant and engaging, this exhibition combats many misconceptions of the Muslim community. These are ordinary individuals, leading ordinary lives. They have a deep attachment to Bristol and are committed to the wellbeing of their city.

They explain the important role that their faith plays in the way they live their lives and the decisions that they make. They hold Islam as a religion of love, peace and reconciliation. They reject violent extremism.

We are delighted to support this exhibition, which I hope will contribute to building understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims, but also within Bristol's diverse Muslim community.

Farooq Siddique, Government Office South West

Introduction

On behalf of the Building the Bridge Programme Board, I am delighted to share with you this wonderful and evocative collection of photographs, which were taken in the winter of 2009/2010. This exhibition celebrates ordinary Muslims living in Bristol, photographed beside a city landmark or in a place that holds a special resonance for them.

These individuals have been selected as a typical cross section of the Muslim community, which has deep roots in Bristol and numbers 35,000 people. We have featured them to give you a glimpse of the richness and diversity of this community and to highlight the huge contribution that these individuals make to the city of Bristol. In these photographs you will see the smiles of confident individuals, who are inspired by their faith to play a vital role in the life of this city, which they have made their home.

Building the Bridge is a programme established to improve understanding between communities, religions and cultures, building respect for each others' values and viewpoints. Our projects aim to give impetus to the full involvement of Muslims in the life of Bristol. Our aim is to empower them to work with their friends, peers and colleagues – to give them the confidence they need to help realise opportunities and provide solutions to the challenges that we face. Bristol can realise significant benefits by winning the full support from this talented, hardworking community.

I hope that you enjoy this book and that it gives you an insight into the aspirations and hopes of the Muslim community. I believe that through their words these individuals reflect Islam's core teachings of peace, love and tolerance. I hope that this document counters the media stereotypes and provides the wider community with a greater understanding of their Muslim neighbours.



I would like to thank all the individuals for taking part, for letting us into their homes and for allowing us to photograph them and explaining their personal insights and ideas.

I must also thank the representatives of the Muslim communities, who came together as a steering group to identify individuals who would reflect the diversity and range of Bristol Muslims. Finally, I would thank all those who helped fund this project.

Hz Mohammed Zaheer Shabir LLB (Hons)
Chair, Building the Bridge Programme Board

Ridwan Hussain

Student, Fishponds

The first word that was revealed to the prophet was the command 'Iqra' – read! The thirst for reading, knowledge and learning was a driving force in the development of Islam. The intellectual achievement of our faith was astonishing, boasting extraordinary architects, doctors, mathematicians and philosophers. Our great thinkers have made a huge contribution to civilisation.

Islam must be about learning – learning and progress. Never has this command to read and to learn been more important than it is today. I believe that ignorance lies at the heart of so many of the problems that we face. For example, the misrepresentation of the Qur'an by people who twist it for their own ends. This is only possible if people do not have a confident understanding of our faith.

I feel strongly that everyone must have the same opportunities to learn – women as well as men. For me this equality is central to Islam, which has strong female role models – the Prophet's first wife, Khadeejah, for example, was a confident and very successful businesswoman who was a vital support to her husband.

I am drawn to teach. For me, above all else, this means developing ambition in young people. I want to open their eyes to possibilities and say "you can do it – take your chance". We all have potential. We all need to have something to strive for – a clear purpose. We need to help each other realise our goals. Our young people should be undaunted and strive to be athletes, doctors, lawyers, architects, broadcasters or builders. They need dreams that they can devote themselves to without distraction. It is important to set their sights high.

I want to be a mainstream teacher, playing a full part in society, who happens to be a Muslim. I love teaching about Islam, because it helps me to focus on my path. I believe that all people need to have some form of spiritual development. Without a spiritual dimension in our lives we lose purpose – living life just for the day and personal enjoyment would for me be pointless.

The Qur'an lays out simply how we must live our lives. We must examine our actions because one day we will have to answer for them to God. I cannot understand how a Muslim can commit the terrible evils carried out by terrorists. I don't even know whether to pity them, because they are going to be questioned by God. There is nowhere in the Qur'an that allows you to kill people, that justifies killing innocent people.

In Islam we must grow in confidence. I believe that we cannot be distracted from the important purpose of leading a full, good life. We must have a deep understanding of the Qur'an and embrace its imperative for learning and progress.

We have a great responsibility to ensure that there is a true understanding of the Qur'an and the Islamic faith for children as they grow up in our communities. If they don't have clarity from what we tell them, then they will look elsewhere for information, turning to the Internet and seeing the distortions from people with a sinister agenda. We need to make our teaching as accessible to as wide a portion of our community as possible – which is why I believe that we must now preach in English. It is so important that our entire congregation, young and old, can hear and understand the truth of Islam.



Latif Ismail

Director, Transparency Research, Brislington

Being a Muslim in Bristol means for me building bridges between communities and tearing down walls that divide them. It means always to smile – no matter how difficult life gets.

Islam must be the most misunderstood religion in the world. The news media doesn't help. Press reports covering our faith can be sensationalist and distorting.

The incredible variety of our races adds to the uncertainty. There are more than 1 billion Muslims across the world, living on every continent. Our ethnic customs and traditions are too often confused with our faith. The Muslim community in Bristol reflects this variety and fragmentation.

Perhaps the Somali community, my own people, are the most misunderstood of all. Media coverage of Somali pirates and Al-Shabab militants thriving in our war-torn homeland affect the way that people see us. Facing this suspicion puts additional stress on Somali immigrants, who are working hard to rebuild their lives following the trauma of terrible years of war, social disorder and refugee camps.

The truth is that the vast majority of Somalis in Bristol are determined, hardworking people. Many have been through ordeals that their neighbours can hardly imagine. It has taken all their energy and ingenuity to survive and keep their families safe. Many Somalis are attracted to the UK to seek a safe haven but also this is a great place to do business. Just a few years after their arrival in Bristol, Somalis have already established over 100 businesses here.

But many Somalis face huge social problems. There are a lot of single mothers – due to the number of men who have been killed in the war. Depression and post-traumatic stress have resulted in family breakdowns. Children who have spent years in refugee camps and have had little formal education can find it hard to hold their own at school.

These are, however, resourceful people. They have survived because they can rely on one another and have a strong sense of community. I believe, with understanding and support from Bristol people, that they can thrive and make a valuable contribution to this city.

Bristol has a long history of welcoming refugees and migrant communities. It is perhaps appropriate that a strong symbol for this city is the Clifton Suspension Bridge, which was designed by the son of a refugee, who fled the reign of terror during the French revolution.

For me being a Muslim means greeting people of all ethnicities and races, believers and non-believers, with a salutation of peace. Smiling at all faces. It means helping your neighbours, the elderly and people in need. Giving to charity and not being overcome by greed.

It means desiring perfection in piety and gratitude. Being respectful, always humble and not having an attitude. It means to respect and obey your parents and not raising your voice in their presence. Also, for me it means being peaceful and walking away if someone wants to fight.



Zubair Ali

A-Level Student, Beatboxing Vocalist & Lyricist, St George

Zubair they say I'm the voice of truth from Bristol's streets, I'm a proud Muslim spittin reality through my accapella pieces, flowin over my own beats...

I'm a Muslim. My religion is Islam, and I use beatboxing and poetry as a way of letting people know what Islam is actually, really about.

Because you can see in the media today what they're calling us – they're calling us terrorists and stuff like this. They're putting us in a bad light. So I thought that I would use lyrics and start spreading the truth.

Islam is a religion of peace and it's a way of life. If you look into Islam you can see what a beautiful religion it is. I just want to let people know the truth. As a Muslim, it's my duty to pass on my knowledge of Islam.

I write for Muslims and non-Muslims. Obviously there are some bad apples within the religion just as there are in other religions. And some people don't follow Islam properly. So for them it's like a wake-up call. But before it's a wake-up call for anyone else it's a wake-up call first for me. That's one of the reasons why I write these lyrics. To wake up myself to what I should be doing. Because I can't just be saying that I want to get people doing this and that. Following the right thing and then not following it myself. I would be a hypocrite – you know what I mean?

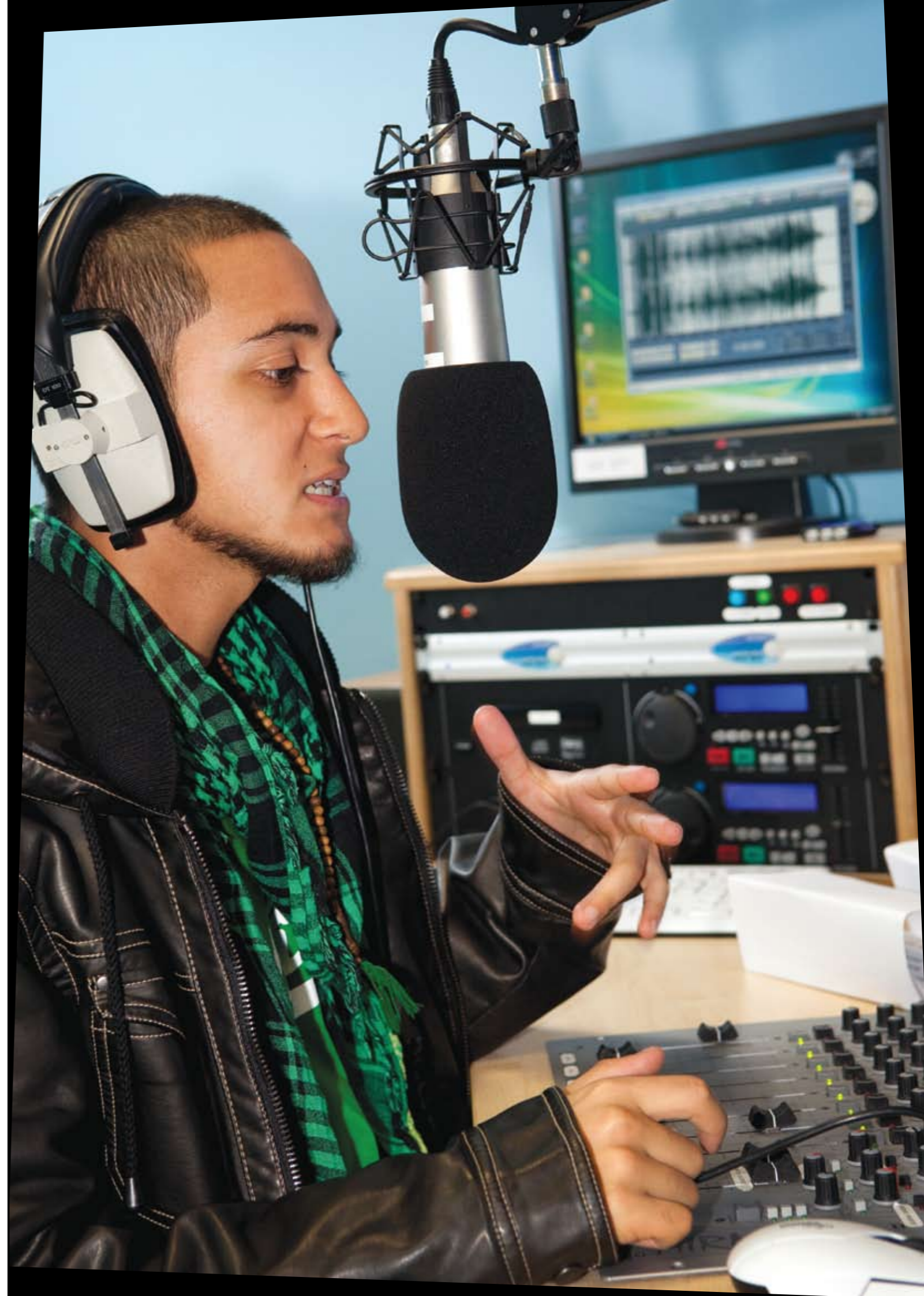
Bristol is a nice city. It's quite diverse and the people are mainly good. There needs to be more awareness on tackling drugs and helping young people. I will get into politics with my lyrics too, making people think about putting a greater emphasis on helping youth. Finding more good places for them to go.

At the minute I work on my own. I'm getting a friend into writing lyrics and a bit of beatboxing – hopefully we'll do a few things together. There's a lot of rappers up in London who are reverts – converts to Islam. They do a lot of rapping for Islam. Over here in Bristol there's no one that does it – only me.

But I would really want to hear from people in Bristol who are up for making changes and have talents such as creative writing (poetry, speeches etc) to help change our city for the better.

When I am working on making a CD I will have quite a few acapella pieces – with no music behind it, as I would like people to focus on the words I am saying, people tend to listen to musical beats a lot more and kinda get lost within it instead of focusing on what the real messages behind the tracks are.

My message is for everyone, even if you have a different religion. I would like to share my views and follow my duty to share my religion. Islam teaches a way of life. Islam itself is about peace.



Majida Islam Khan

Student, Bradley Stoke

My faith is the centre of my life. I would put it as simply as that. That doesn't mean that I have to wear a huge label and carry around baggage everywhere letting people know just how Muslim I am and how amazing that is – it's nothing like that at all. It's a very internal thing. It's something that affects my everyday decisions, the way I try to live my life, the way I treat my city, the way I treat the people around me.

I am proud that peace is such a fundamental part of the Muslim faith. When we greet each other we say Salaam, which means peace. When I grew up in the 90s, as a Muslim, I didn't have to give my views on peace a second thought. To me it was a universal principle. But I was in the US during 9/11 and things have changed. Now, whether we like it or not, every Muslim needs to act as an ambassador of their faith. Rather than getting offended by all the stereotypes or questions, I now consider it my responsibility to represent Islam's peaceful nature and to educate others about the misconceptions.

My faith tells me that that I need to be part of the community. In fact, it is my religious duty to be a positive and active citizen; to look after my neighbours and give to charity – not just Muslim citizens and neighbours but all people, be they any colour, any faith, or no faith.

Islam is by no means an isolationist religion. For me it means going out and participating in community organisations, going to Council House meetings and saying what I believe to be the truth. It is due to Islam's teachings on society that I consider it my duty to be involved for the betterment of Bristol, which is now my home and its residents, who are now my people.

As a Muslim wanting to make a difference, I believe Bristol as a city has helped me to flourish. This city truly has a lot to offer, it's simply buzzing with multicultural opportunities. If you genuinely want to contribute, participate and make a difference, Bristol has all the resources available to make that a reality. But ultimately, as citizens it's our responsibility to get out there, find these opportunities and make them work for us.



Samar Ibrahim

Student, Youth Group Leader & Film maker, Oldbury Court

The first day I wore a headscarf I remember I was so scared. I was the only one wearing a headscarf and I was afraid that my close mates might pick on me. I remember wearing a hoody over the headscarf. One of my friends saw me on the way into school. She saw my hoody and said, "you look so weird". Then she saw my headscarf and she was so shocked. She said: "What are you doing? You have beautiful hair, why would you cover it?" I said that it's because I have beautiful hair that I want to cover it.

I was 15. It took me a long time to make the decision. But, I said to myself, this is an important step that I have got to take. Hair is considered to be one of the beauties of a woman and is something that she should keep just for her husband and her family. It's also a kind of protection. Women wearing a headscarf must be respected.

I was born in the Sudan and moved to Holland when I was about eight years old. In Holland the majority of Muslims are just from Morocco and Turkey. There was terrible rivalry between the two communities. I came to the UK to live in Bristol three years ago. It's weird, but when I arrived in Bristol I felt happy and at home almost immediately. I enjoy the mix of people in St Pauls and Easton. There are Africans, Bengalis, Jamaicans, Pakistanis, Somalis, Sudanese all living together in one community.

Last year I went back to the Sudan and saw my grandmother and grandfather, aunts and uncles. I stayed there for three months. Everyone was so kind to me. They took me to see wonderful places. The family atmosphere was so nice. But, you know what? After two months I couldn't wait to come home – Bristol is my home. I am very proud to be Muslim and to be a black girl. I am Sudanese, but Bristol is my home.

My youth group – Waasila Girls – brings together Muslims from all over the world. Our aim is to build the confidence of young women and give them a true understanding of the Qur'an. One of the big challenges that we have is to dispel myths – we have to separate

the truth of our religion from cultural traditions. Honour killing and arranged marriage, for example, have absolutely nothing at all to do with our religion.

The idea that girls and women should not be educated has no root in Islam. Women are clever. We use our brains. There is a whole chapter in the Qur'an that talks about women. Nowhere does it say that women cannot be educated. Aisha, the Prophet's youngest wife, was so close to him. She is considered to be one of the most important scholars in early Islam and much of Sharia law is based on the Hadiths that she passed on. She was like an information resource. The Prophet wouldn't have chosen a woman for such a crucial role if he didn't mean us to be respected.

I studied for a BTEC in media last year at Soundwell College. I want to know how the media works. The media is horrible to Muslims. It shows us in such a bad way. They call us terrorists. The media feels like our biggest enemy. But, with better understanding, I believe the media can be part of the solution rather than the problem. There are a lot of people who think that Islam is a bad religion. But it is a peaceful religion. There have been bad Muslims – I'm not even sure that you would call them Muslims.

Islam teaches you how to behave – to have respect for your parents. How to live together. How to communicate with your neighbours – not just your Muslim neighbours but all your neighbours. Being a good member of the community is vital for Muslims. I will try to be a good neighbour.



Ibrahim Bashir

Pupil, Redland Green School

I've been fencing seriously for two years now and I have just qualified for the British Youth Championships, which are being held up in Sheffield. I take this sport very seriously. I'm a member of the Bristol Fencing Club in Cotham, and attend fencing classes four times a week. I have a paper round and use the money that I earn to buy the equipment I need – which is very expensive.

Bristol has been a great city to grow up in. It's got a good atmosphere. It's not like London where everything's so crowded – but here there's still everything you need. I enjoy hanging out with friends at their houses – that kind of thing. We go to the park – the Downs is a popular place – or into town. I like Cabot Circus. Everything is close. School is just a ten minutes walk from my house.

I have friends who are Muslims – others who aren't. It doesn't really matter to be honest. Most people from the wider community are friendly. They are curious and ask about our faith very carefully. They don't want to be offensive. There are, of course, some people who don't really listen or understand and find out more before making assumptions. From my experience they are the minority.

What does being a Muslim mean to me? Well, it's about equality. It's about no one being more important than anyone else. In the Qur'an the Prophet gathered the people together and spoke to them as equals. This drew them to him – people who had been oppressed by harsh rulers. They were attracted to a faith where everyone was equal and couldn't be pushed around. Where everyone has an equal say. That's important to me.

Being a Muslim is about good behaviour – being sensible at school and working hard. It's about not messing about or getting into pointless fights.

Islam is a peaceful religion. But it takes just a tiny number of violent people to ruin the way we are seen. They blow themselves up here, killing people. We then go after their leaders in Afghanistan, Iraq, wherever – sending in troops. The extremists are then encouraged to commit more acts of terror, which makes the wider community here angrier. It's a bad cycle that's getting more and more frightening.

Being a Muslim means having respect for parents, elders, family members and teachers.

My faith means that I won't drink or smoke. I don't know how much of a problem that will be. Drinking is a big part of the British culture for kids and if everyone else is drinking, for some people it could be difficult not joining in – feeling left out. When you're in a society where everyone does something, it does take a lot of confidence to stand up and say no. But I have made up my mind not to drink.



Jane Edge Saleem

GP, Horfield

I can almost tell you the name of the one Asian girl who was in my school, because it was so unusual. So I knew nothing really about other faiths. I wasn't a practising Christian. My family were quite agnostic. I went off to university, spending three years in Cambridge and then studying at the Royal Free Hospital in London, where I met Moin Saleem, a fellow medical student, who I went on to marry.

Moin is an Indian Muslim. We were fellow students. He was somebody who took part and joined in, but didn't get embroiled in all the kind of messy relationship stuff and would be sober throughout every event and was very secure and comfortable in that place. We were placed in very similar kind of work, doing a lot of training alongside one another and I suppose that I got to know him gradually. Over a long period of time I got to think, this is interesting and I fell in love with him.

So I converted to Islam 20 years ago and married 19 years ago. We lived in the Midlands and then London before coming to Bristol. My husband has a big family so there's a big community within the family for us to identify ourselves as Muslim alongside. Our children have gone to an Islamic school on a Sunday, run at the City Academy. We don't go to any particular Mosque, but we'll go for Eid Prayers to Bristol University's Islamic Society, or to Bradley Stoke. During Ramadan, there are Iftars held by a school in Bradley Stoke, which brings together a really interesting and diverse mix of Bristol Muslims.

Moin's mother is a GP, so his perception was that women took education seriously and went out to work. In relation to work not many of my patients know that I am Muslim. I don't look like a Muslim and I practice under my maiden name. I think that my understanding of Islam adds something to the relationship with Muslim families, even if my faith is not disclosed. I think having a religious belief is also of value in one's relationships with people of other faiths as well. I don't ever see it as a barrier to my work.

I think that Islam – what are the right words to describe it? – gives women the sort of preservation of modesty that is hugely valuable. I feel quite sad to see how the West degrades its women in its fashions. I think that Islam provides a sort of protection and actually there's a great valuing of women when the Qur'an is interpreted as it should be.

There has been much misinterpretation and actually, the Qur'an was very forward thinking for its time and women had rights well before they did in the West. I do feel that it needs interpretation in the light of the time. The Qur'an was revealed at a particular time and place and I think that sometimes people can be very literal in their interpretation of things that actually need to be understood in the context of the time in which they were written.

I have four children. We have close friendships in Bristol with other Muslim families and the sharing of experience with those other kids is really crucial for them.

Ramadan's usually a lovely month and the kids are onboard for fasting. I think the shared hardship brings us closer together. We tend to pare things back to the minimum at this time, slowing down our usually very hectic lives. There is an expectation that everyone will try and be at home for Iftar to break the fast and we pray much more together than we normally would, so I think we all feel get closer to God and closer to one another.



Taban Yaseen Othman

Film maker, Horfield

I am a Muslim woman and I am very happy to be here in Bristol. I feel very free and fortunate. I like the way that people smile here – I think that they are content. But, the thing that is most important to me is that people are able to be themselves and to enjoy full lives and their individuality. As a film maker, I am just frustrated that I haven't been able to work here in the theatre or in the UK film industry.

My family comes from Kurdistan in the north of Iraq. I was 13 when Saddam Hussein sent his troops to crush my people at the end of the Gulf War. We managed to escape by crossing the border into Iran, so that he couldn't touch us. We remained sheltering in the mountains for two months. It was terrible. We were surrounded by people who were dying from hunger and bad water. Our freedom fighters came down from the mountains and liberated Kurdistan.

In Iraq I worked as a TV presenter and for women's organisations – fighting for our rights. I became involved in making stage plays and TV dramas. I started to make my own short films. There was a lot to say and make films about. I was concerned with women's issues and challenging the military system.

It is very frustrating, but since arriving in Bristol I haven't been able to work in the theatre or film industry. My work experience in Bristol amounts to working in a restaurant cleaning dishes.

I came to Bristol when I married. One of my first impressions on arriving was how everyone smiled at me. In my country people don't seem to smile any more. They are mourning, mourning all the time. They are very serious. They have serious faces.

I was impressed by the freedom that people have here – they can really be themselves. There is greater individuality. In Iraq everyone dresses in black and wears similar clothes. Here, there is greater variety. Women can wear strong, bright colours. It was exciting for me to see this when I arrived.

I am open minded, independent and free but the Muslim faith still has a very strong hold for me. Particularly, as I now raise my daughter. I think that there are very positive aspects of our faith.

I think that Muslims have a special commitment to their children and family life which is very special. In the West there does seem to be a greater fragmentation of families. People don't seem always to have great devotion for their partners and children don't always appear to have respect and commitment for their parents, which is sad. Our belief in the Qur'an and the Prophet mean that Muslim people have great integrity. We cannot lie when God's name is mentioned.

Seeing the effect of alcohol on society here in the West, I do feel also that it is important that Muslims don't drink and get drunk. I don't like how people's personalities can change at night as they drink alcohol.

I am very attracted to Western society. I do feel that as refugees and immigrants that we need to work hard to make sure that we are open to life in the UK. We must seek to belong – and this means becoming involved in the community, which is very important for me.



Dr Masuda Mian

Magistrate, Westbury-on-Trym

I watched the first television reports covering 9/11 with total disbelief. I just couldn't believe that anyone could do something so evil. When I found out that Muslims were involved I went numb. For two or three days, every time I looked at the television the nightmare returned. How could anybody kill innocent people – people who haven't done anything wrong?

Suicide – taking your own life – is forbidden in Islam. In our religion, life is given by God and he is the only one who can take it. I just don't know where the terrorists get their ideology. How can they believe that our peaceful religion justifies the killing of innocent people?

9/11 changed perceptions of Muslims for a lot of people. Even close friends of ours asked: "What do you think about this?" They were relieved when we condemned the attacks. But I was shocked that they might even think that we could sympathise with these unspeakable horrors. It demonstrated to me just how quickly a religion can be stigmatised.

Islam has come under the media spotlight. However, so many distortions and inaccuracies are being presented. For example, the idea that Islam is opposed to the education of girls and women. This is nonsense. The Qur'an places huge emphasis on learning. Our Prophet said that we should even go to China to be educated. In those days, for an Arab, going to China was like travelling to the ends of the earth.

I was the first girl from my family who went to university as my parents were adamant that I should have a higher education. They wanted to give me an education so that I would be independent – and that I could stand on my own feet whatever happened in later life. I went to medical school in Pakistan in 1962 and qualified as a doctor in 1967.

I gave up medicine in the early 1980s, when I had young children. I needed to give my time to my daughters. Later, when they were all in school, I wanted to do something for the community. So in 1991 I became the first Muslim woman to be appointed as a Justice of the Peace in Bristol.

People too often confuse culture and religion. As a Magistrate, recently I attended a training session covering domestic violence. Someone stood up and said that Muslim women can't do anything about domestic violence because Islam doesn't allow them to divorce their husbands. I explained that Muslim women have equal rights to divorce their husbands. It was lucky that I was there to correct this misconception.

People know very little about Islam and they often believe what they read in the press. I do feel at the moment that the Muslim community doesn't have the sort of leaders who can put our side across effectively.

Islam means peace. For me it is a religion of peace, tolerance, forgiveness, honesty and compassion. How you help other people defines the sort of human being that you are – how you treat other people. That is what I know of Islam. These are the values I was brought up with and these are the values I have tried to instil in my daughters. Equality is at the centre of Islam regardless of race, colour or creed.



Lara Almasri

Civil Engineer, Bradley Stoke

I feel very proud to be a Muslim. I believe that it has enabled me to be more understanding of others. Islam accepts and is very welcoming to other faiths. We are encouraged to study Christianity and Judaism and respect and understand them.

My family comes from Palestine. My father left his family to study in Egypt – but then the war broke out and he couldn't return home. So he stayed in Egypt until he finished his university degree – becoming an agricultural engineer – before joining his family. He married and I was born.

My father was a very devout man. He built our house close to the mosque so that he could attend all the prayers. But, despite being very religious, he was also open-minded. He believed that we needed to be allowed to make our own choices. This view was shared by my mother, who was also highly educated. My parents felt that it was important that we were aware of everything around us and that we had a complete view of the world. To understand a different culture and faith, they sent us to a Roman Catholic school in Jordan.

I am very grateful to my parents for the important choices that they made for me when I was young. It has prepared me to understand and feel at home in a different culture and environment.

I studied civil engineering, which in Jordan is not an unusual career choice for girls – as many women as men studied engineering in my university. In fact, in some years they had to cap the number of women on my course to ensure that there were enough guys.

It was while we were students that I met my husband, who was also studying civil engineering, although at a different university. We married and moved to the United States, where my husband studied for a Masters Degree and then won a scholarship to study for a PhD. But, with the outbreak of the Iraq war, scholarships were reduced and he had to look for work, joining an engineering firm in Chicago.

Once we were married our plan had been to return to our homeland in Palestine, where my husband still has strong family links. He had even bought a flat there for us to move to. But, with the outbreak of the uprising, again our plans were disrupted.

My husband looked for a post to begin a career with an international engineering firm. He chose a global firm based in the UK and was given the choice to work in either Bristol or Epsom.

We googled Bristol and thought that it looked like a lovely city to bring up our family. We moved here and have been very happy. It's a really good size – small enough to be familiar and yet it has everything that you need and could expect to find in a major city. I find a peace and tranquillity in Bristol that I don't associate with big cities. The people here are very friendly.

Being a Muslim is an important part of who I am – it's part of my identity and something that I would like my daughters to be aware of. They are just beginning to understand that they are part of this faith. Simple things define this identity for them. For example, at school, the choices that they have to make for their school dinners. Initially, we did consider giving them packed lunches. But, we decided early on that they need to be aware of who they are – and telling the dinner lady what they can and cannot eat is part of this.



Abdul Wahab, MBE

Entrepreneur, Community Builder, Knowle

In 1960 I settled in Bristol. We Muslims were immigrants. We were out of our culture; we were out of our lands and far away from our families. It was so important that we were not alone.

I set about bringing together Muslims from the university and from across the city. We began by establishing a Mosque. My priority was to create a place where we could meet and socialise. Where we could share our problems – and overcome our difficulties together. Fifty years ago I started organising the Muslim community and I am doing so still.

I am proud of the foundations that we have built for the Muslim community. We have created strong organisations; we have comfortable places to meet, Mosques where we can worship and even a housing association, which helps our people onto the housing ladder. I am so proud of how much has been achieved and thankful to all the people who have worked hard together to make it happen.

There was a time when I was desperately worried that future generations would not want to keep our culture and religion alive. My fear was that when we are gone, that maybe the second, or the third generation would not be interested in our Muslim heritage. But, that has not happened. Young people are committed to keeping their own religion and culture – and for me that is very important and rewarding.

I believe that we have created a solid platform in Bristol that can support our culture for future generations. We have places where young people can go, talk and learn about our faith and heritage.

It is, of course, vital that Muslims are integrated into the wider community. We must not turn inwards and hold ourselves apart. But, we must be confident and participate fully in society.

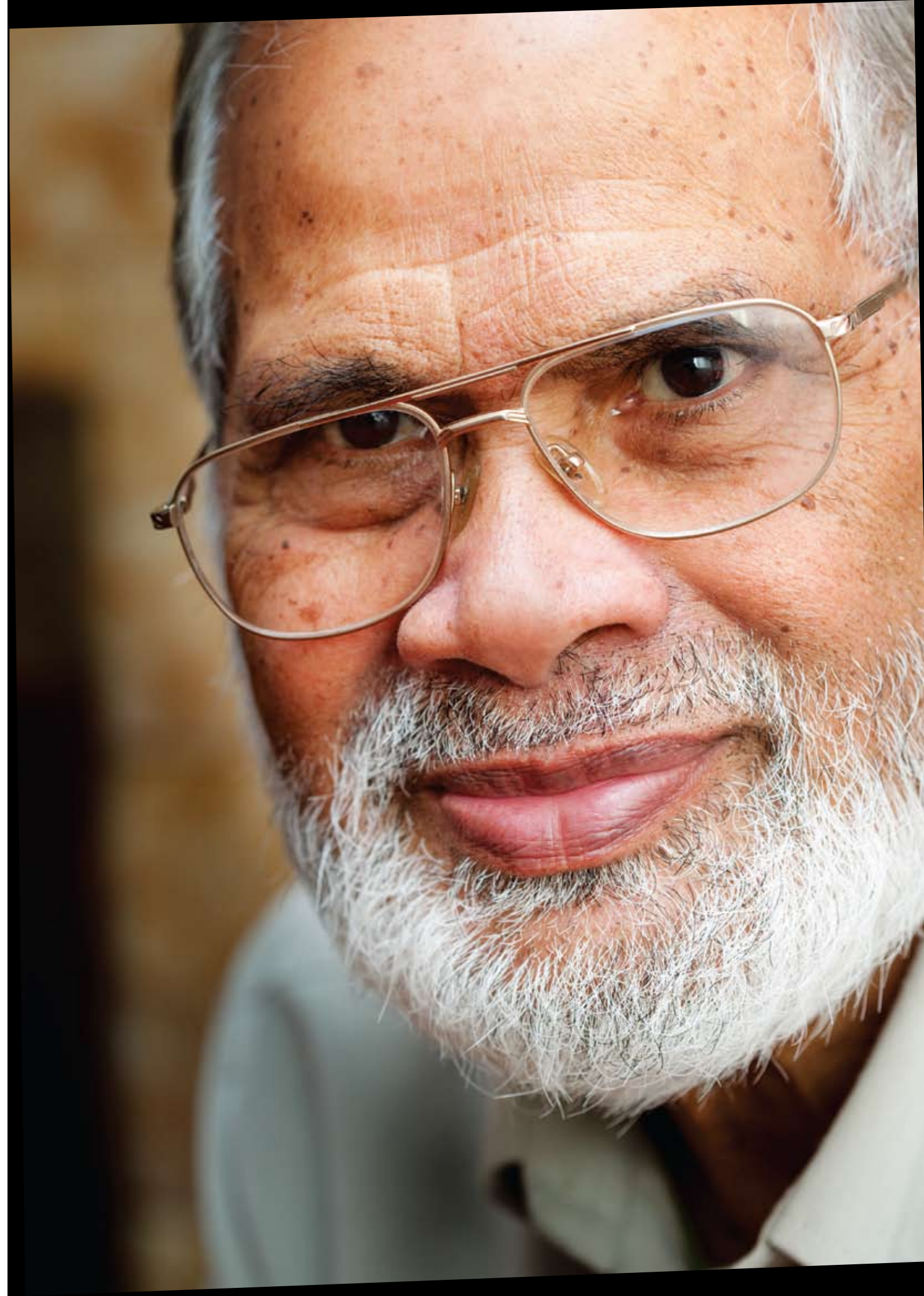
Maybe in all my years working with the Muslim community in Bristol, the greatest challenge is being faced in the 21st century. Despite the fact that the vast majority of Muslims totally condemned the attacks on 9/11 and 7/7, there are people who blame all Muslims as though we are somehow responsible together.

Too often the media concentrates on the few extreme people and their opinions. The vast majority of peaceful Muslims, who totally oppose extreme terrorism, are forgotten. The media has a massive responsibility to make sure that it does not run sensational reports that mislead public opinion. Turning the wider community against Muslims plays straight into the terrorists' hands.

We do not support extremism – we are alert and protect our young people from violent people, who attempt to mislead them through misinterpretations of Islam and the Qur'an.

I admire the justice of Islam. Allah does not tolerate injustice. So we must be just – fair and respectful. We must be just to our family, just to our neighbours and just to the environment. If all of us practiced justice to the limit of our capacity, I believe that we would live in peace and that the world would be transformed.

We are social beings. All people are a family. And as with a family, if its members work together and support each other, then it will thrive and be content. We cannot be selfish. True fulfilment and satisfaction comes from living a life for others.



Graham Fox (Aziz Bin Yussof)

Police Neighbourhood Inspector, Trinity Road

I can go to any country in the world and say salam alikoum to any Muslim and immediately there's a bond. Pakistani, Somali, Arab, Malay, Indonesian – it doesn't matter. I've experienced this all over the world and I've got to say that it's something really awe inspiring. Being a Muslim is about recognising the positive impact of having a defined sister and brotherhood.

My mother is Malay and comes from Kuala Lumpur and my father is English. They met while he was in the Navy in the early 1960s. My father converted to Islam and married my mother. I was born into the faith and brought up a Muslim, spending my formative years in the Far East – Malaysia, Brunei and Singapore – where I had most of my education.

My father is fluent in Malay and Arabic and was very well respected within the Asian community where we lived. He always said to us: "Never be afraid of who you are." He instilled pride into us children. He gave us not only our British names, but also a Muslim identity. When I'm in an Islamic environment I'm always referred to by my Islamic name. This dual identity has helped me understand my cultural origin both from a Western and Islamic perspective.

My religion is important to me. I abide by the basic rules. I believe in Heaven and Hell – I accept the teachings of the Qur'an. I believe that religion is a very personal journey and that even though there is a road map to guide us, I believe that Allah sees the good and bad in people and that one day we will all be judged.

My father will always tell people that I am far too sensitive to be a police officer! He says to me: "I can't believe that you're a copper. You're not hard enough." I tell him that you don't need to 'be hard' to be a Police Officer – but you need to understand how communities work. The police service has taught me to apply myself effectively in any given situation. I consider myself to be gregarious and a people person. Before I was in the Police Service I was a SRN. I served as an Intensive Care Charge Nurse in London. I have always been attracted to people-orientated professions.

Three years ago I worked at St Pauls Carnival as a Police Support Commander whilst stationed at Taunton and had a fantastic time. Following this I felt that there was an opportunity for me to use my cultural skills in a positive way and I requested a transfer. I came to Bristol two years ago and my feet haven't touched the ground since. It's been a full on, incredible experience and I really relish working in such a culturally diverse environment.

I am drawn to the cosmopolitanism of this city; the wonderful mix of races and cultures. I would love to see everyone in harmony with each other – whether they're white, black, Caribbean or Asian – and that as time goes on that the Police become increasingly representative of the community they serve.

In Bristol we are very fortunate in having Muslim community leaders who are very open, hardworking and representative of their people. I think that the work that we are doing together is excellent. It is certainly a completely different picture in Bristol to the national or international media perception. In many areas there is still a long way to go, but I definitely think that in this city we are going in the right direction. I have and will continue to do all I can with my team to make the lives of the local community a better and safer place to live.

