

# Roseville residents turn out to ‘Ask a Muslim Woman’

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*From left, Nyia Harris, spoken word artist Marie Chante, Farhiya Del, Haweya Farah and Huda Yusuf. Some 140 people packed the community room at the Roseville Library for the “Ask a Muslim Woman” panel discussion, hosted by Harris. Mike Munzenrider*



*Haweya Farah explained that a good way to combat Islamophobia is by just talking to people, during the “Ask a Muslim Woman” panel discussion at the Roseville Library on June 11. Mike Munzenrider*

Have you experienced overt racism? Does it bother you when women aren’t dressed modestly? As a man, may I introduce myself to you? Who owns you?

These questions, and more, were asked June 11 at the Roseville Library during Do Good Roseville’s “Ask a Muslim Woman” panel discussion.

Some 140 people packed the standing-room-only community room to hear from Farhiya Del, Haweya Farah and Huda Yusuf — the three answered “yes,” “no,” “yes” and “nobody but God,” to the questions above.

“Ask a Muslim Woman” was the third such event put on by Do Good Roseville and the first to be held at the Ramsey County library. Previous “Ask a Black Man” panel discussions were held in February and May at other Roseville locations.

The panel was framed not as a discussion of Islam, but the three women’s lives.

On experiences of overt racism, which opened the event, Farah recounted a fearful encounter with a small group of men at a Wyoming pharmacy while she was on vacation, during which she said she was intimidated and feared for her life.

“Who is this, why is she here?” Farah recounted the men saying aloud as she waited to fill a prescription for one of her children. Farah said there was a woman in line ahead of her and a female cashier — neither spoke up to help. The cashier averted her eyes.

Farah said she rushed out of the store and the men followed. She escaped the situation by driving away.

A recurring theme throughout was the power of speaking up. Farah said she felt let down by the women at the pharmacy.

“Your voice and your privilege are very much needed, today,” she said to the majority white crowd.

## **Kids and travel**

Emcee Nyia Harris posed questions to the panel that were submitted by the audience, and while many dealt with weighty issues, the panel answered with candor and humor.

Farah, speaking about ways to combat Islamophobia, urged attendees to get to know people who are Muslim.

“We have so much in common — talk to me. I love mayonnaise,” she said of a particularly Minnesotan obsession, that includes ranch dressing, too. She added that, in light of her headscarf, folks should ask about her hair. “Nobody knows what my hair cut is.”

Like Farah, Del and Yusuf are mothers, and questions touched on educating kids about people of other cultures.

“If you don’t define them as other,” Yusuf said, speaking of raising children, “they’ll never define them as other.”

Del offered some practical advice. Explaining the best way to invite Somali-American kids to a birthday party, she said to be aware of language barriers, to skip the email and to pick up the phone.

“Some parents don’t read,” she pointed out.

All three women are professionals: Yusuf holds dual chemistry degrees and works for a medical device company. Del is a second grade teacher in Minneapolis who holds a social work degree and a master’s in education. Farah is a chronic pulmonary disease specialist at the University of Minnesota Medical Center, among other things, and is pursuing an MBA in health care management.

Despite her accomplishments and credo of “out dressing, out smarting, out reading ...” everyone, Yusuf said she frequently feels judged for being who she is, especially during her frequent business travel, and especially while boarding planes.

“I just see the stares on the plane,” she said, peaking inside passengers’ minds. “I hope she doesn’t sit next to me. I hope she doesn’t sit next to me ...”

“I don’t let it define who I am.”

### **‘Try talking to someone’**

Do Good Roseville’s Kathy Ramundt said she and other organizers discussed safety concerns prior to the public event, since it was unclear who might show up.

“We’re asking these women to put themselves out there,” she said, noting anti-Muslim sentiments. “We just don’t want to be naive about it.”

The panel discussion was warm with a receptive audience — one man reportedly stormed out in anger, though it was barely noticed.

Carol Jackson, who manages the Ramsey County Library in Shoreview, said the “Ask” series is now a bimonthly event at the Roseville Library. The next panel, “Ask a Community Youth,” is scheduled for Tuesday, Sept. 26.

Asked about the biggest misconception about Muslim women, Yusuf was succinct.

“[It’s] that we’re oppressed by men ... and that we need saving,” she said.

Farah brought together many of the discussion’s threads when asked how a Muslim woman like herself might just be recognized as simply American.

“Take the labels away,” she said, adding, “Change your mind and change your views and try talking to someone.”

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