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# COURAGE PROJECT



Lubar Institute  
for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions  
University of Wisconsin–Madison



## Meetings schedule:

**Introduction**  
January 2011  
Temple Beth El

**Essay sharing**  
February 2011  
Midvale  
Community  
Lutheran Church

**Performance**  
March – May 2011  
Islamic Center &  
Shorewood Elem.  
Sch., Madison, WI

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Courage?



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## Welcome to Courage Project

By Charles Cohen,  
Director of LISAR



The Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions (LISAR) is proud to sponsor the Courage Project, the brainchild of our Graduate Fellow, Rohany Nayan, along with Cantor Deborah Martin of Temple Beth El and Pastor Katie Baardseth of Midvale Community Lutheran Church, both of them members of the Institute's External Steering Committee. This formidable trio have pooled their talents and energy to create LISAR's first project involving high school students.

The Courage Project asks students to work with each other to challenge stereotypes and communicate candidly about their own beliefs. Consonant with the Institute's philosophy, it does not seek to homogenize the Abrahamic traditions into a thin gruel of "similarities"; rather, it encourages students to seek each other out from the perspective of their own faith, encouraging them to appreciate others' traditions without unmooring them from theirs.

What those students themselves have accomplished is on immediate display in the program, and, more importantly, on more permanent residence in their hearts and minds, for the experience of creating something with peers from different religious traditions will continue to inform their lives. The mother of one of the participants brought this point home to me when I chanced upon her in an entirely different context. Her daughter, she told me, would never have ventured beyond the usual schoolday circles without having been involved in the Project. As a result, her daughter has acquired new, unexpected friends, broadening her social and intellectual horizons.

We could all profit from this example.

Charles L. Cohen  
Professor of History and Religious Studies  
Director, Lubar Institute for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions



## Introduction to the Courage Project

By

Rohany Nayan, Graduate Fellow of LISAR  
Cantor Deborah Martin of Temple Beth El  
Pastor Katie Baardseth of Midvale  
Community Lutheran Church

"What is a courageous act?"

"I can't think of anything courageous I've done in my life."

These were among the most common comments given at a meeting of twenty Madison-area high school students — Jewish, Christian and Muslim — when they first met in January 2011 to embark on the semester-long "Courage Project." This project initiated by the Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions (LISAR) is the first project involving area youth directed by Rohany Nayan, the Graduate Fellow at LISAR together with leadership and co-operations from Cantor Deborah Martin of Temple Beth El and Pastor Katie Baardseth of Midvale Community Lutheran Church.

The seeds for the Courage Project 2011 were planted at our first interfaith collaboration in the "Families of Abraham" event enjoining families with a special focus on children's interfaith education in December of 2008. This first interfaith collaboration came out of the relationships and friendships that we three have been privileged to develop and carry out based on our mutual commitment to intentional interfaith engagement after having served several years on the External Steering Committee at LISAR. Due to the generosity of Mr. and Mrs. Keith D. Nosbusch from Milwaukee and the sponsorship of LISAR, this project became a reality and finally took off this year.

This semester-long project began by recruiting participants from religious communities of the Abrahamic tradition in the November 2010. From January to May 2011, the participants traveled to different places of worship to meet, have dialogues, break bread together and broaden their cultural experiences. Through these simple acts of getting to know peers they may not have otherwise befriended

and sharing cultural dishes, these teenage participants discovered their own sense of bravery in everyday life which will prove especially necessary during tough times for particular religious communities. Students often feel that they are not allowed to talk about their religious beliefs outside of their places of worship. It requires acts of courage from the teenagers to begin the interfaith dialogues that is highly encouraged by the program.

The Courage Project seeks to explore the concept of courageous acts, foster friendships, understanding, dialogues and co-operations among the teenage student participants. Through the activities designed in this program these youth were led to discover courage in themselves, share their stories with others in writing and through dialogues, and engage in conversations that often center on interethnic and religious stereotypes and boundaries. Many students have shared with us how they have gained a lot of mutual respect and understanding of the different issues that each of the faiths have to deal with in their world. These realizations have led them to invite everyone to try to be more welcoming, understanding and accepting of each other.

A focus on the youth is a focus on the future. It is our hope that relationships nurtured by the "Courage Project" will set the stage for increased openness, understanding and tolerance among the next generations especially in work of peace making with the entire community. Programs like the Courage Project are essential to promote peace in our world. It often takes the naïveté and innocence of our youth to open the eyes of the adults to see how we can live in peace and harmony with one another without any preconceived notions about other people. These teens are future leaders and it is important for them to have the courage to reach out and find ways to work together for the betterment of their communities. Starting the conversation is what is so important. This is the courage that we need to find as these young people did.



# Meeting #1

At Temple Beth El - Participants go around the room to complete their worksheets for their icebreaker activities where they have to find specific information about each other.

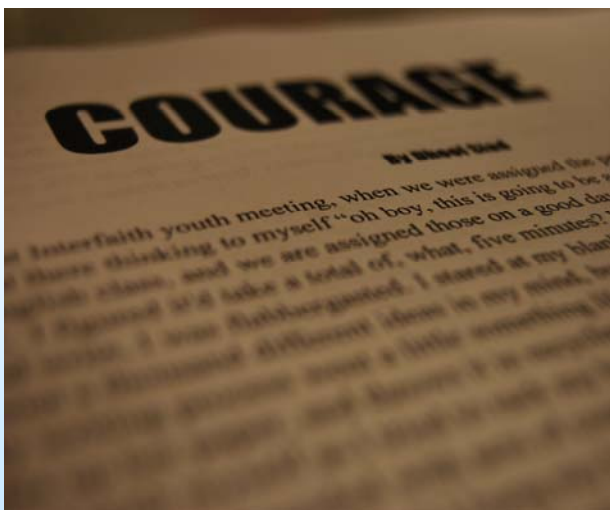


## Basic rules Governing the meetings



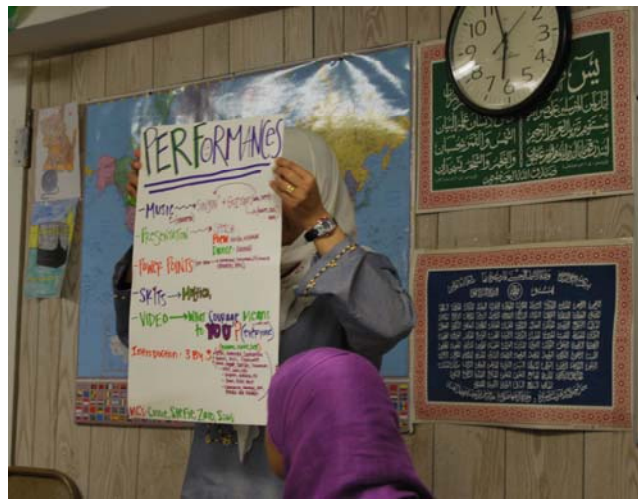
## Meeting #2

At the Midvale Community Lutheran Church – Participants discuss the essays that they wrote about the theme “courage”.

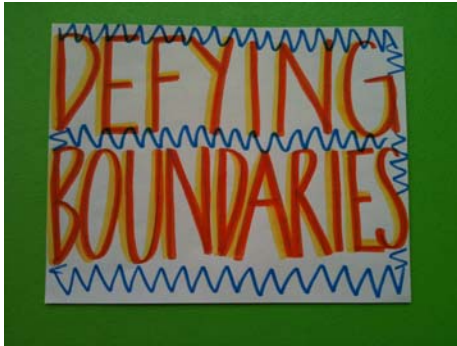


## Meeting #3

At the *Islamic Center* - Participants start planning for the performances for the Finale of the Courage Project. Activities include brainstorming, discussions, eating dinner and a brief tour of the center.



# What is Courage?





## Courage is...

By Stephanie Ballesta

Singing, dancing, and acting have always been my passions. As a young girl, every time I attended a theatrical production, my eyes would dreamily watch the actors onstage. I remember feeling energy radiating from the show, and sensing how truly passionate they were about performing. I knew that I wanted to be a performing artist. I could not imagine pursuing any other career. To this day, I still believe that in order to achieve true happiness, I must have a career in the musical theatre field.

When I first began to have the life changing realization that I wanted a career in theatre, I was about fourteen years old. I had heard about a theatre camp in New York City. Being the curious young woman I am, I found the website of this camp, and discovered, that if I were to attend, I would get to live in New York City for one week and practice singing, dancing, and acting for eight hours per day. Spending my summer days in a city that thrives on theatre sounded fantastic. After much research, and discussion, my parents decided to send me to the camp in New York City. I was so excited!

As the first day of camp approached, I realized that I was going to walk into the studios on that very first morning and know absolutely no one. The thought of this scared me. I had always been able to make friends, but I had never been in a situation where I was so far from home, and knew no one. I became nervous, but decided that all I had to do was walk in with a bright smile, and introduce myself to anyone and everyone. I was bound to make friends that way!

On the first day of camp, I was a tad shy. Many of the other campers lived in New York City, or were at least from the East Coast. I was one of two Midwesterners, and the only camper from Wisconsin. It was fun, but I was a little overwhelmed. On the second day, however, things changed. After a particular dance rehearsal, everyone quickly changed their shoes and left the studio, except for one girl. Not wanting to leave her there all by herself, I stayed back and introduced myself. She told me her name was Tiffani, and we instantly became friends. From that point on, I began meeting more and more people, and blossoming as a performer.

By stepping outside of my comfort zone, I learned that no matter where one goes, it is truly possible to make a friend. I also learned that making the extra effort to greet someone and introduce oneself could lead to an abundance of opportunities, and lifelong friendships.

Going to this theatre camp may not sound incredibly courageous, but at the time, it took a lot of courage. I flew to New York, signed up to spend eight hours per day with people I had never met, and loved every minute of it. Going to this camp was one of the first times I discovered I have a passion for meeting new people. It showed me that simply being myself is a courageous thing to do. Ultimately, it helped shape me into who I am today; an incredibly outgoing and musical young woman.

# My Courage

## By Betul Bolat

My family is from Turkey, but I was born here in America and consider myself Turkish, **and** American. My parents, Gulden and Alper, first came to America to study. While my mother was finishing up her Masters, I was born, and my father opened his own business after his studies. I became a big sister at age six when my first brother, Yunus, was born. Six years after my brother Yunus was born, my second little brother, Yusuf, came into the world. All three of us are being raised as Muslims with rich Turkish culture, and Islam is very important to us.

At nine years old, I first started covering. I was in 4<sup>th</sup> grade and I was faced with a lot of different questions. Questions like, "What is that?", "Are you bald?", and "Do you have cancer". I was asked if I **absolutely had** to wear it, and that is one question I am always being asked today. The reason I wear my headscarf is not because I **absolutely have** to. Although it is mandatory, a Muslim woman covers for the simple reason that God has commanded it in Qur'an. It is simply just an act of obedience towards God. Since God commanded that women must cover, I do. Also, we believe that the headscarf or Hijab is modesty, it is purity, is a shield, and is righteousness. Islam gives so much importance and value to women, that women must protect themselves. Imagine you have something very valuable for example, such as a diamond.

Women were created different than men. Women must not live up to a man's standards, but must live up to a woman's standards. Women are always trying to become "equal" with men. When a man dresses to be respected, they wear a business suit that covers them to throat, wrist, and ankle and keep their hair simple. If women want to be "equal" to men, they must also dress appropriately. In Islam, men are also required to dress modestly, not just women. A major misconception is that women are forced to wear the hijab by their parents or by their husbands, but this is not true. We don't see the hijab as a responsibility, but we see it as a right given to us by our Creator who knows us best. A lot of people may think that the more a woman covers the less freedom she has but according to Muslims, it is actually the opposite. The less she wears, the more she is likely to be put in the line of male criticism, as well as women criticism whom they see each other as competition. When a woman wears a headscarf it puts importance to the talents, personalities, intelligence, and good deeds of a woman, rather than her good looks. If a woman does not cover her head, it does not mean that she is not a Muslim. Even though I cover my head, this does not mean that I am doing everything in the religion of Islam perfectly. A woman that does not cover their head is just simply not ready to cover, just like I might struggle in another area in my religion.

My goal and every Muslim's goal is to erase what

the media has put into your mind. Erase the stereotypes, and the misconceptions. What the media wants you to know is not always true. A misconception like, "Women are not as respected as men in Islam" is wrong. Islam is actually the most progressive of all religions when it comes to women's rights. Islam allows women to have their own businesses, to inherit wealth, choose marriage partners, and etc. Muslim women are more politically recognized in Muslim countries than women in the West. Indonesia, Turkey, Pakistan all elected Women Prime Ministers even though the United States has not elected a female as a president yet. In Islam, a woman even keeps her maiden name after marriage.

It isn't very hard for me to practice my religion in America since there is such a large population of Muslims here. That doesn't mean there aren't struggles though. There is always some sort of discrimination. In the past, what was once done to African Americans for example, is now being done to Muslims in a different way. One example I'd like to share with you is when I was on the bus ride back home from school.

I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. The bell rang and I packed my things just as I normally as I did every day. I went outside and waited until my bus came. I had had a good day, but I was ready to go home. I was one of the last to get on the bus and as I walked through the aisle to find a seat, I passed a girl I didn't know very well at all. She started asking what my name was to the kid next to her, and I thought she might want to ask me a question, so I sat in the seat behind hers. As soon as I sat there, she got up and went all the way to the back of the bus. Then she started to yell at everyone that I was a terrorist and that I was going to bomb the whole bus up. She yelled out a lot of mean things about me and the bus driver didn't even seem to notice. I tried not to listen to her but I couldn't help it and I started crying. The girl that got off before me smiled and told me not to listen to them. She told me that they didn't know what they were saying. I nodded. When the bus arrived at my bus stop, I got up really fast to avoid the stares. A few people asked me why I was crying as I got off. As soon as I got off, I ran all the way home and slammed the door behind me. I didn't answer when my friend called and asked me what happened. I was frustrated that the girl didn't even bother to ask me when she found out I was a Muslim. I was also frustrated that not very many people on the bus even bothered to look at what was happening. I couldn't believe they didn't even know why I was crying. My mom had comforted me when I had gotten home but she also told me that there was no reason to cry. That I had to show people like her how I could stay strong. What people said didn't bother me as much after that. I hope that you will not believe everything that the media tells you.

# My Courageous Act

## By Amanda Bradley

Two summers ago my Church group decided to go on a mission trip down to New Orleans. It sounded like a great opportunity – we were going to go and help rebuild after Katrina and we were going to meet lots of new people – not to mention bond with our church group members. Although this seemed like such a fun idea, I was a little scared to leave home. I had taken several family vacations to Florida and California, but I had always been with a family member (whether that be my mom and dad or my aunt). So this was all new to me – I would be going by myself in a sense that I wouldn't have a family member with, but I would be going with people I knew (from my church group). I was excited to go, but nervous to go without family. But, finally the day came that all 9 of us (7 youth and 2 adults) were off on our journey. We arrived at church early in the morning (around 6 a.m. I think), said our 'goodbyes' to our families, then piled into our HUGE van. Then we were off to

New Orleans with several stops along the way. New Orleans was extremely fun – we painted grave stones, met tons of fun new people, and ate some interesting new foods - I even tried alligator (which was pretty good for me seeing as I am a very picky eater). The trip overall was great because I got to try lots of new things and meet many new people. So not only was trying all the new things courageous, but the trip itself – and experiencing it with people other than who I'm used to (my family).

I really wanted to write about New Orleans because I learned so much by being there. It was somewhere I'm not used to, but quickly adapted to. My trip to New Orleans taught me to be very courageous. It was all about going outside of your boundaries and trying new things. And I did just that and now I have an amazing trip to talk about!

# Rapid Failures, Rapid Successes

By Matt Brennecke

If you've ever seen the Menominee River, on the border of Northern Wisconsin and Upper Michigan, it may not look like much to canoe. This is if you have ever gone canoeing before, and you were looking through the eyes of experience. I however was not, before this 4 day 3 night expedition I had only gone canoeing once, and this was only about 20 feet from shore. So, imagine my surprise when our camp bus pulled up to the port, and I viewed the coppery orange waters, which were not moving all that slow. We unloaded our canoes and I began to examine these waters, the river was about 15 feet wide, which was just wide enough for your six canoes to go two by two. Lets fast forward about a day, in which our canoeing was fairly easy, but all of this changed when the rain came pouring in. If not for the lightning I would not have been phased, but to add in we were approaching the rapids with some speed.

Let me describe briefly who was in my canoe at the time, We had one girl, Molly, who was much more frightened than even I was by the lightning alone. She was in front and in the middle was a larger kid named Ian who was just there to rest and to give Molly and I directions. Anyway, as we saw the rapids approaching rather quickly and I could hear the faint screams of our councilors to come over to a near over hanging branch where a oak tree once stood. After being briefed on how to tackle these rapids by our councilors we had to take our leap of faith off of the dead oak and into the white foaming waters of the rapids. We did not go first, thank goodness, but as the first canoe pulled away I could hear the muffled screams of the passenger on that canoe. This just made my anticipation for the coming events greater. As our turn approached I could tell that both Molly and Ian were feeling their stomachs twisting, just the same as I was, and that this was going to be the ride of a life time. As we descended from the tree, I could feel that stomach twisting feeling that thrill seekers search for, and I knew this was my time. As we came up to the turn that the councilors pointed out I gripped my paddle and dug it into the soil on the floor of the river and pushed off as hard as I could. This sent

us shooting forward towards the towering waves, which would crash into our hull and sent us toppling over. Being in the back I was able to both steer and propel us forward so that we would be facing our destination, a break in the water that lead into a nook of sorts where a canoe would be waiting. As we grew closer to that nook, I noticed the speed of the water became faster, and the waves grew taller, and I knew that if I did not do something we would over shoot our nook, and go into the 5 foot water fall that lied ahead. It all happened quickly as I drove my paddle into the ground in an attempt to slow us down, or even stop us all together. It did just that, and slowed us down just enough that if we all paddled as hard as possible we would be able to make our side route. As these waves crashed into our canoe and soaked us down to the bone we slowly worked our way over to our refuge and as we grew closer, I could start to feel a touch of fatigue falling over my muscles and I could tell that I could not hold this up. In a final attempt I gave our canoe a powerful surge which pushed us right next to our nook. As I said before, I am not the best of canoers, and due to this I did not know how to stop and turn around, which was necessary to get into the nook. So as we slowly fell farther away from our refuge I noticed a branch overhanging just enough that I could reach and grab it, which is just what I did. At that same time, another canoer noticed that we were in trouble and reached their paddle out to save us. Molly pulled on the oar as I kept us at bay on the branch, and we were finally able to get to our refuge.

Now the reason that I wanted to write about it, was simply because, I had nothing else to write about. When brainstorming to think about what courageous thing I had done, nothing came to mind, and I had to think very hard as to when I was courageous. Some lessons I learned were that even though you may not be the best at something, you can always improve and become better. "Practice makes Perfect" - Vince Lombardi. Also that if you put your faith in the lord, and trust me I was praying quite a bit when I was hanging on to that dead oak, He will give, He will provide, He will keep His promises.

# A Moment That Changed My Life

By Samantha Elmer

One day in music class in second grade, my music teacher, Ms. Moschea, announced that we would be doing an in class production of "Hansel and Gretel". I thought it might be fun. Auditions for the roles would be held that week for the roles. That night while I was riding in the car with my mom I told her about the show. I said that I wanted to audition for the role of Gretel but didn't know if I should. I was afraid of what might happen. "What would the other kids say? What if no one liked how I sang?" It would be my first time really singing in front of a group. My mom told me I should just go for it. I did, I went for it.

On the day of the auditions, Ms. Moschea had us sit in a circle with our eyes closed so we couldn't see who was auditioning, we would just be judged on whoever sang the song the best. She had everyone who was auditioning for a role sing a short solo. I sang my solo and almost everyone voted for me. I was cast as Gretel. It was my first leading role. It might seem silly now but as a second-grader, I was very excited.

That summer there were auditions for Oregon's community theatre group, Oregon Straw Hat Players. They were putting on a production of "Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat". There were roles available for kids in the children's choir. I thought it might be a lot of fun but I wasn't sure if I could do it or not. I decided to go to the auditions to see what they were like. When I saw 10 kids sing "Happy Birthday", my confidence grew. I thought to myself "I can do that", so I filled out an audition form.

When it was my turn to audition I took a deep breath and sang one of my songs from "Hansel and Gretel", I can still remember the song. When I was done singing the people on the audition panel seemed pleased, though at the time I couldn't be sure if it was because of my singing or just the fact that they didn't have to hear "Happy Birthday" or the "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star" again for the millionth time. All I knew was that I had given it my best shot. I wasn't really expecting anything to happen, but a few days later, I found out that I was chosen to be part of the children's chorus. It was one of the most exciting moments of my life. I was trying something completely new and I found out that I loved it!

My experience in "Joseph" absolutely changed my life. As many people say, I caught the "acting bug". In away I became addicted to it. Since then I have been involved with numerous theatrical productions, sometimes up to four a year. Now I'm also thinking about majoring in theatre in college. All of this brings me back to the decision I made in second grade. I didn't know if I had the courage to sing in front of my peers, but I did. If I hadn't done that I probably wouldn't be where I am today and wouldn't have had all of the wonderful experiences I have while doing theatre. I also wouldn't have met most of the wonderful people in my life. This may sound cheesy but your actions really can start a chain reaction. Sometimes you just have to take chances.

# Courage

## By Cassie Frankel

Courage is a big word, a hard word to define. Thinking of something courageous I've done wasn't an easy task. Courage seemed like something only superheroes had, not the average American teenager. After I thought about it some more though, I realized that the most courageous thing I could think of doing (besides saving someone out of a burning building, of course) was getting back up and trying again. While I've definitely had to do a lot of that in my life, from learning to ride a bike to failing my first and second road tests, the moment that really sticks out to me happened within NFTY. Being quite involved in NFTY, I decided to run for the position of regional Membership Vice President last spring. It was a tough election, running against a popular junior, whose last chance it was to be on board. It took a lot not to get intimidated by him, and to not let him stop me from running.

On the day of the election, I had never been more nervous in my entire life. We gave our speeches, and sat in a waiting room, both hoping for the best. When the president came in and told us that he had won by three votes, I was crushed. It felt good to know that it was a close election, I guess, but I still wanted the position and had put so much time and effort into the election. I congratulated him, and went off to go call my parents and tell them the news. I was upset for a while, but with the reassuring words of my friends and family, I got over it.

Flash-forward to this past December, when the elections season for this year began. A casual meeting was held for all those interested in running for board, just to get to know the process, et cetera. After some coaxing, I attended the meeting, just in case maybe I wanted to run again. I received the descriptions of all the board positions and struggled with finding one I really wanted to run for, while always slightly gravitating to the idea of running

for President, the highest office. A few weeks later, I was talking to my friend about elections, specifically about how we felt that none of the people running for president were qualified for the job. After stating that I really wouldn't be happy with any of them as president, he coolly said "Well why don't you do it?" I was absolutely shocked. To think of running for something so big after losing felt so strange, but he had a point. If you've got a complaint, fix it yourself. I read the descriptions over again, and I realized that this was really the only position I could see myself as. Just as I thought that, a little bit of doubt crept into my mind. "What would everyone think? I lost last year, they must think I'm crazy for trying something so big." I ignored the doubt, knowing that this was the right decision to make. I worked up the nerve to tell some friends about running, and everyone was thrilled with the idea. Some even said things like "Wow, that's really cool that you didn't let what happened last year get to you." Comments like those were great to hear, and really encouraging, but it was my first discouraging comment that was what made me sure I had to do it. One of my closest friends, who I even currently hold a co-chair position with, told me she didn't see it. The thought that she couldn't see me doing it stung, but made me want to do it so much more. I wanted to prove her wrong, just as I had a few weeks before with climbing a tree. I wanted to show her that I was capable, even though running for president is much bigger than climbing a silly orange tree. I wanted to show her, show everyone, that I had the courage - the courage to get back up after I had fallen, and the courage to not let anybody bring me back down. With that courage in me, I sent in my declaration. I, Cassie Frankel, am running for President, and nobody; I mean NOBODY, can stop me from following that dream.

# Prevention is Better Than Cure

By Ebraheem Haneef

Courage in my definition is to overcome your fears for a purpose. That purpose could be religious, humane, or others. Courage isn't just something you face every once in a while. Every time I walk out the door, there is courage within me. I know there are obstacles out there that I would have to overcome. Almost everyday I have to deal with some buffoon calling me "a terrorist" or saying some racist crap in front of me like exclaiming, "Yes, da Qur'an is a very good book, praise Allah," in some Indian accent. It makes me feel sick to the gut. But I never had the courage to tell them it wasn't funny or how I felt about him screaming like that in the halls. Over time, I finally found the courage proudly with the help of friends. Now I feel like I am a strong individual who can speak his mind.

I'm a Muslim. I do have problems with people calling me a terrorist and saying that I do all this crazy crap. But what I didn't think that I would have to deal with was people pushing me around, or make racist comments on the bus, making fun of my religion. At first, I thought that over time it would just go away. Instead, it got worse. Soon enough people got into my head, and they saw and knew that I was about to explode falling into their traps of foolish behavior. I couldn't go to school knowing that I wasn't going to get bullied. Some people would tell me to go to the principal and others would say get into a fight. I'm a man of peace, so I try to prevent fights from happening. There was no way I was going to start one. In addition, if I told somebody, like a teacher, about what was going on, that would only make things worse. The bullies would start shoving me into lockers, and get everyone to call me a snitch. Consulting an adult is not an option here. I didn't think I could do anything, so I would hear the same bull everyday from the same morons in the class with the teachers doing nothing about it like usual. Eventually, I did get into fights after school. This became a my daily schedule. In seventh grade, all I could say was "Hell!" That's how I would describe it. I tried the option of talking to my parents, and they told me to ignore them or that I should tell a teacher. What is the teacher going to do? Often they just stood there watching while it was happening right in front of their

faces. Plus ignoring them only got them upset and soon enough they would start more trouble. My choices were beginning to have boundaries. I felt like I was trapped in my own private bubble. I didn't know any other Muslims my age at the school dealing with this problem or are there any other Muslims out there? Who could I go to?

I started showing courage around my eighth grade year. Before that, I was a follower, just so concern about what others would think about me. I tried preventing people teasing me about my religion by doing what they would do. I felt like I couldn't trust anyone. The only friend I had in the school before moved to Verona and now I was alone. But I didn't kept it that way for long for the anger that was burning inside of me was the ignition about to explode. So, I found a few people whom I thought I could trust and become friends with them to this very day. Thanks to these people cause if I never got the chance to know them, I might have not become the independent person I am today. Instead I'd be the same weak, vulnerable, and a miserable person I was earlier. These few friends I have now would listen, understand, and help to look after me. I didn't feel like a lone sheep no more, lost in the forest, not knowing which way to go. I do have people to help guide me. Slowly over time, my independence grew stronger and little by little I was able to eliminate some of the problems I've been going through since my first term in junior high. I was able to stand up to the ones bullying me.

Finally now I have gained enough courage to stand up for myself. I also taught myself how to be an independent person. Now I feel that I can face any problems especially in standing up against people who bully me about my religion, insult my intelligence, and pick on me just because I am different from them. Courage helps me to be me.

# Caving

## By Johanna Hansen

I don't want to go. I hate my class more than anything. I'd rather be at school than go on this stupid field trip. These were the thoughts that surrounded me as I sat alone on the school bus, 7 am, shivering, because somebody had the bright idea to open his window in the dead of winter; dreading this day that awaited me in a cave.

This was the second of two field trips that that the rocks and ropes gym class goes on every year. Supporting my dread for this caving trip were past experiences with this class not working well together and forming various clicks. Our first field trip, overnight camping, had turned out horribly because of both weather complications and our disastrous dynamics. Because of these past experiences I had little faith that this field trip would be any different. I didn't want to get dirty, or be cold, or spend an entire day with people I didn't like.

After arriving at the sight and descending into the cave we picked our groups of four students to stay with for the day, already making the trip more bearable. Still, I was not looking forward to spending several hours walking around in a dark cave. Our teacher showed us some hidden tunnels that we could climb through, and right then and there I decided to make the best of the trip and traverse through one of the tunnels. My group agreed to this and we began our journey deeper into the earth, the start of an adventure I could never have imagined. I led the way- between rocks big and small, wet and muddy, many areas so small and slippery I thought we would get stuck, and sometimes did. We overcame so many obstacles, one girl getting truly stuck between rocks, the loss of a flashlight and its much needed light, and the overall struggle to fit through the tunnels and make our own path, never knowing where it would lead and where we could get out.

Unlike many groups, who spent most of their time in the much larger main cave, and maybe spent a little time in one of the smaller tunnels, we spent the entire day squished between rocks, struggling to push through and find a way out. It was scary, and exhilarating, and although I came away with many scrapes and bruises, ruined tennis shoes and a coating of mud, it was entirely worth it. The feeling of accomplishment was one that brought unending smiles to our faces, a feeling of courageous success that no one could understand but us four, a feeling better than any other I could have imagined feeling on that day. And it was this feeling that never would have come had it not been for my courage in making the best of the situation given to me and doing what I dreaded most.



# Courage Project Essay

## By Hannah Tikvah Kaiser

When I was in middle school my subconscious goal was to be popular, and to continue to be so in high school. I was friends with all the right people, and was liked by most in school. I was positioned perfectly to be on that track. Through an unfortunate change of heart from my "friends" I was left without a single ally as eighth grade progressed. To try to combat this and win my "friends" back, I decided to do Eighth Grade Poms (a combination between cheerleading and dance), like the majority of people I knew were. I was already a dancer, and figured this would get me back on correct footing with everyone in my group. The captains from the Varsity Poms Squad at my high school came over twice a week after school to work with us, and we performed in my middle school's talent show in the spring. Through this program new members of the squad for the coming year were also recruited.

Naturally, most of the eighth grade pommers auditioned for the varsity squad at my high school. I did as well and made the team, like the rest of the girls. As practice began, my social standing did not improve. I remained an outcast without any friends. Luckily, the two girls who would become my only friends joined the squad about a month after the rest of the dancers began summer practice. My two new friends and I together became the outcasts of the squad, but we did not mind. We were there because we loved to dance, we loved performing, and we wanted to show our school spirit; we were not there, unlike everyone else, to gain popularity and fame around our school.

My sophomore year, I met and became friends with someone who remains one of my best friends to this day. She was my lab partner in biology, and she opened my eyes and allowed me to see that I didn't need to be popular - in fact, this goal hurt more than helped me. Because of her, I look at life the way I do now. She helped me become a truly unique individual with a mature, philosophical look on life. With her support, I quit poms and began to cultivate my love for individuality, fashion, and Judaism. I felt like a new person. I slowly moved away from my two friends who remained on the poms team - I had met two other wonderful individuals who are as well my best friends to this day.

As someone who has struggled through all of high schools obstacles, the one thing I truly cherish is my ability to defy social norms and be an individual with my own mind and a strong sense of self and my goals. I would not have matured to this stage had I not quit poms and moved beyond that want for popularity and social acceptance. Surprisingly, because of this view I have gained almost everything I wanted. I am a successful student with lots of meaningful activities outside of school, tons of amazing friends, and people at school know me and enjoy my company. Only being true to myself and my morals has allowed me to reach this point, and even though I felt so rejected during my freshman and sophomore years, I have learned invaluable lessons from that experience.

## Courage on the Stage

### By Shahwaiz Khan

Going up to the stage in my ironed collared shirt and my black pants with shiny new shoes, looking over to the crowd sitting in front of me with smiles on surprised at the courage of a 3<sup>rd</sup> grader. I walked up to the stage with pride when they announced my name but little did the audience know that this 3<sup>rd</sup> grader was shivering inside. What I presented was a poem about the conservation of water, which I took weeks to memorize for this program, held in a five-star hotel in front of many people and the chief guest, Minister of Information and Social Welfare of Pakistan. This program was held for a debate competition for college students, I volunteered to do my poem in front of these people for the craze of the spotlight even when I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade! As I went near the microphone and started my poem, I started out strong and enthusiastic, keeping in mind all the little tricks my mom taught me. My words were touching every audience member's heart when suddenly half way through my mind went blank and I stuttered. I didn't bring my paper with me because of my over confidence I knew I had it, but I didn't. As I looked at the audience, I would never forget that moment when tears started to fall and within the blink of an eye I started balling. I ran down the stage with my head held down and regretting my decision of ever doing this. Whenever a child is in trouble, he/she runs to his/her mom, that's what exactly this 3<sup>rd</sup> grader did. I ran to my mom who was sitting in the first row and embraced her. The anchor cheered me up and the whole crowd gave me a round of applause but I still wasn't satisfied. The show went on and my mom tried to convince me to go up there one more time and give in another shot. My self esteem was low and I couldn't get the nerve to say yes and face that embarrassment again.

The show was at its near end and the awards ceremony was about to begin when I finally got the courage to say "yes I will do it again". My mom ran over to the judges and the anchor was informed that I will be going once again. The anchor once again called me up on stage and I heard many cheering from the audience, which boosted my self esteem. I walked over again to the stage rising from my seat, through this short journey, a thousand thoughts went through my mind and my legs numb. My body didn't want me to go up there but my brain overcame and gained strength and I was once again on the stage. I started over with my poem. Surprising myself, I did it. I read the whole poem and at the end I looked at the audience everyone held their hands high and clapped for me. At that moment I felt proud of what I did, I was glad my mom convinced me to give it another try. I was happy that I gathered up the courage to present myself in front of these people.

This was my most courageous act because I prepared myself at a very young age to take risks. This was a perfect example of taking risk and failing but also an example of not giving up or finishing what you started. This act taught me that I can achieve what I strive with courage. I will never forget those "15 minutes of fame" because that small act taught me many lessons which I will never forget in life. I still go back to this day and tell my friends proudly of what I did. I am still up for challenges like these to perform in front of people with a little boost from my family and friends.

# Courageous Act

## By Samantha Lauhon

In the beginning of my sophomore year of high school, I decided to join our school's cross country team. A lot of my friends had joined the prior year and had really enjoyed themselves so they all began convincing me to start running with them each summer morning. They told me about all of the social potlucks, team spirit, and altogether uplifting feeling that came with running cross country. Not considering myself much of an athletic person at the time, the idea of running anywhere between four and five miles a day was a terrifying thought for me. What if I wasn't able to keep up with them? How would I get back to the school? Would I pass out? All these questions swam through my mind on the first day as my dad drove me to Elver Park, the starting point for that morning's run and the park with the steepest hills in Madison. My friends all greeted me with huge, warm smiles and excited hugs as I laced up my newly purchased running shoes and swung my hair up into a ponytail. As I looked around the shelter where everyone got ready, all my eyes could see were girls who seemed as if they had been running their entire lives. Intimidation and fear began to course through my veins and I wanted to run back behind the shrinking image of my dad's car screaming for him to let me leave with him. I handed in my athletic fee and doctor's card to my new coach and took a seat on a park bench next to my friend. The coach proceeded to tell us that we would be running four to six mile intervals that included running up and then back down a fairly steep hill. I thought she was joking until I heard the chorus of groans fill the shelter. This was the real deal. Everyone around me started getting up to leave, so I took one last swig of water and joined the pack.

I soon found out that even before we all were to attempt the interval set, a warm-up run was required to "get the blood flowing". This made absolutely no sense to me and only increased my fears of becoming too tired to keep up with the group. A couple of girls at the front began their brisk jog and away we went. After my first few steps on the moist, dew-covered grass, I began to relax a little. It didn't seem so bad, I felt as if I could continue jogging for a long while. Why did everyone always complain about running everywhere? I felt great! I began to increase my pace and soon found myself near the front of the pack. Sadly, I had only gone about one hundred meters, so when we turned the corner and began the climb up our first hill, the true feeling of running began to kick in. My breathing increased, I began to feel sharp pains in my calves, and I felt as if the wind had been knocked out of me. Slowly, but surely, I started falling to the back of the crowd of girls. Luckily, some of my more experienced friends knew that was the smart place to begin their run, so I had some company.

Our warm up jog was only about one mile and already, I was panting. When the group finally stopped and began to drink from their water bottles, I was beyond relieved. Success was a great feeling – until I remembered that we still had an entire set of intervals to complete. Our coach yelled to us that we only had three minutes before we were to begin our first mile loop and I was stunned. How could we already be starting again when we had just finished the treacherous warm-up run? I wanted to protest, but knew it would do no good. She told us to all line up at the starting position and get ready to begin. We were told to do anywhere between four and six laps for a successful workout. I was terrified. She counted down from three, and away we went.

This time, I was a little more experienced, and knew to start out slow. I found a girl that was going around the same pace as me and tried to stick with her to the end. The loop began downhill, which gave me some hope. All I could think about was finishing. I tried to keep my breathing steady and my pace constant, while keeping up with my friend. All of a sudden, a steep hill loomed in front of us and I wanted to turn around and run the other way. But, the girl next to me wasn't stopping, so neither was I. I needed to complete at least one lap to continue being on the cross country team. Closing my eyes and pumping my arms, I pushed through the pain and the mental exhaustion until I found myself at the top of the hill. From that moment on, wave of determination swept over me. I was going to finish four loops of this hilly track if it killed me – which it might. Although it was a struggle and made me feel as if I was going to fall over multiple times, I completed that lap and the next two after it. A couple of my friends, who had run cross country the previous year, decided they were going to stop. They congratulated me on accomplishing three laps on my very first day of practice. But, I couldn't stop. I needed to finish this workout no matter what.

I lined up with the remaining girls one last time. Our coach yelled for us to begin, and with a leap of my heart, I starting moving my legs. This lap was the best for me, because every time I passed a section of the loop, I knew it would be the last time I did so. Even the ominous hill became a friendly companion in my quest for accomplishment. As I ran across the final four hundred meters of the interval, all my friends began to cheer. Hearing their support as I crossed the finish line and knowing that I had accomplished my goal was a feeling I will never forget. It accompanies me at the end of every race, even now, and it is one of the main reasons I loved cross country that year and continue to love it every day I run.

I chose to write about my first run as part of

# Courage

## By Kaitlin Mork

About a year ago, during Spring break 2010, my family and I took a trip to the Smoky Mountains in Tennessee. We spent our week hiking and experiencing the outdoors as much as possible. In the middle of the week, my dad and I decided to challenge ourselves a little more and journey to the top of the third highest peak in the Smoky Mountains. The summit of this mountain, Mt. Le Conte, reaches a height of 6,953 feet, and the trail we took is a fourteen mile hike round-trip. We left early in the morning and after an adventurous, seven mile incline, we reached the summit around noon. We arrived at the top cold, wet, and exhausted, but yet were thoroughly enjoying the experience.

After admiring the view from above, peering down at the tops of bright white clouds, we decided to journey back down the mountain. Rather than returning the way we had come, we agreed to take the slightly shorter, yet more adventurous path down. Less than half a mile down from the summit, our path seemed to stop. As we looked forward to where the path would have usually been, we noticed that the flat path carved out in the side of the mountain had been snowed and iced over. This made our route ahead part of the continuous steep slope down the frozen face of the mountain. Not expecting this much snow, my dad and I had not dressed properly for this hike. Our shoes were drenched and our fingers and toes were beginning to ache from the cold. At this point, our only options were to hike back up to the summit and return the way we had come, or trudge through this short, yet dangerous section of the path we were on and continue on down. Despite the numbness we felt from the cold and the potential danger we faced, we decided to continue on that path and arrive at the bottom as soon as possible.

One behind the other, we dug the sides of our hiking shoes deep into the snow and ice to slowly and steadily make our way across that section of the path. We found that by reaching our arms up the slope, we could use roots and weeds poking through the snow to help brace ourselves to the face of the mountain. We were constantly on edge, turning around to make sure the other was okay at any faint sound of slipping or statement of fear. We tried to avoid thinking about a "worst case scenario" in a situation such as this. We were well aware that the top of a mountain was not an ideal spot to be in need of rescuing. My dad and I were both a little anxious through this part of the hike, but since we were already a ways out on the snowy path, we had no choice but to continue on and work through our fears. By taking our time and supporting each other, we had the courage to carry on and make it through that part of the hike. We overcame our fears by trusting ourselves and having faith that we would make it to the path at the other end safely.

Before long, we reached the continuation of the path, finally canopied by trees. Snow coated our numb legs up to our knees, our fingers and toes were frozen, and we were exhausted, but despite all of this, we were very happy to have had made it safely. This adventure helped me to realize that even when put in a frightening or dangerous situation, trust and courage is enough to get you through. The fourteen mile hike my dad and I took to the summit of Mt. Le Conte was an experience I will never forget.

# A Courageous Moment

## By Anders Ohm

A courageous moment in my life happened over spring break two years ago. I was going backpacking with my family in Joshua Tree National Park in California. We had set up our tents and I went for a little walk with my dad on a dried up river bed. On the way back, we ended up going past a turn and I realized we were lost about five minutes past the turn. I got a little scared but then realized we can just follow our tracks, which we followed to get back to the campsite.

I was able to stay calm when I got lost and found my way back, and realized there was a simple way back very quickly, but for the few seconds at first I got scared. I was able to lead myself and my Dad back, even though he wasn't scared and probably didn't think of it as anything much.

# My Courageous Act

By Ross Perkel

Courage can come in many forms. We deem a soldier who gives his life defending his ideology a "courageous hero." Most of us would agree that anyone who wakes up in the morning and goes to work at a police station or a fire house because the job needs to get done is courageous. Even something as trivial as someone sky diving or bungee jumping or even jumping a snow board is courageous. While most of us will never fight for our ideologies or uphold our own country's laws, we all have the opportunity every day to change the world around us for the better through our courageous actions. Gandhi once said "Be the change you wish to see in the world." In eighth grade at Hamilton Middle School, doing a unit on basic philosophies was the first time I heard that particular quote and it touched me deeply. Up until that point, I had been content with living my life as it was and accepting the world as a static quantity that wouldn't change. Inspired by the quote I began to try and act more courageously, to be the catalyst to the change.

As I entered the gym locker rooms later that day, the quote rang especially true in my mind. I saw one of the semi daily rituals that I had always despised in the school but had done nothing to change. The locker room had always been a place free of teacher supervision, a place where the bigger, stronger kid's true colors came out and that day was no exception. One of the weaker, less athletic boys from our class had dared to venture, whether on purpose or accidentally, into the "cool kids" section of the locker room. The retribution was cruel and immediate. I had always known that my friends and classmates weren't the most accepting people in the world but that particular day, I finally had the courage to tell them so. Standing up to my friends for something that I believed in took a lot of courage for my eighth grade self to do but I felt like it needed to be done. Intervening on the weaker kid's behalf seemed to me to be only a small part of me trying to change my world but it was a step in the right direction.

Standing up for someone who is being picked on may seem small in the grand scheme of things and I agree with you that it is. The reason that I chose to make that decision and to share my choice is because every journey starts with a single step, every river with a trickle and every change with a single act. We all always have the chance every second to change what we stand for and why all the time. I know that I probably will never go undercover in the mob or tame lions in Africa and I probably won't even eat a fricasseed frog. However, I will always try to live my life as an example to others not of how they should live, but rather as an example of someone who is trying to change the way we all live. One helping hand has the potential to alter the course of someone's life but you must first have the courage to offer it.

# COURAGE

By Dhool Siad

Last Interfaith youth meeting, when we were assigned the project of writing a 1000 word essay, I sat there thinking to myself “oh boy, this is going to be a breeze”, because I am in an honors English class, and we are assigned those on a good day. So throughout the weeks, I just put it off. I figured it'd take a total of, what, five minutes? When it came time to actually sit down and write, I was flabbergasted. I stared at my blank notebook page in wonder. All this time I had about a thousand different ideas in my mind, but somehow they were all drained. Just like that. My writing process went a little something like this: Dhool starts to scribble a sentence, crumples up her paper, and throws it in recycling bin. Dhool repeats the process. I was so frustrated with myself as I tried to rack my brain for any possible remotely decent idea. All my life I've been surrounded with acts of courage done by others, what have I done in my life that was remotely courageous? I hung my head in defeat and drowsiness as I went to go wash my face. As I looked in the mirror, I saw my headscarf slouching disoriented and that was when I when I was hit with the brick of realization. An act of courage that I have done was RIGHT in front of me! All this time! The day I decided to wear my headscarf.

It was the summer before the start of my 6<sup>th</sup> grade year. More accurately it was the day of the registration. I was sitting there, picking out my outfit, when I felt like something was missing. I looked at my usual t-shirt, capris, combination, and it just didn't look right to me. I replaced my capris pants with long jeans, and ditched my short t-shirt for a long sleeved one. I felt a little more confident in that outfit choice, so I quickly pulled it on. Something still felt empty. Like that feeling that you're forgetting something and you just don't know what it is. I went to the living room to talk to my older sister, and I saw her pulling on her headscarf, which she started to wear when she was my age. I quickly fled back to my drawer and tore it up, flinging random pairs of socks and tank tops all over the place, until I found what I was looking for at the way bottom of the dresser. The headscarf I always wore to the Friday prayers and to Sunday school. I pulled it on over my head with a sense of pride and belonging. I felt complete. I tore into my parents' room, flaunting my ensemble, and they were both speechless. My mother pulled me close to her, and she asked if I was sure I wanted to do this. As I nodded, I was ambushed with smiles of pride and hugs from both of my parents. My sister beamed at me. I even smiled at myself. I was so happy, and that lasted until we pulled into the parking lot of my middle school. Then my happiness was replaced with fear and anxiety. What if no

one liked me? What if people made fun of me? What if they wouldn't let me wear my headscarf? I was getting major cold feet. I swallowed my fear as I walked into the school with my mom walking behind and my sister walking next to me. To say that people were accepting of my decision to wear my headscarf was an understatement. People were fascinated and curious! My peers from 5<sup>th</sup> grades gazed at the cloth wrapped around my head in wonder and amazement. The few who were brave enough even came and asked me questions. I was flattered and so relieved! To this day, my peers and friends are still accepting of me. I have also realized that my wearing the headscarf is a great way to make new friends as well. I have discovered that the headscarf is a great conversation starter.

I feel that my wearing the headscarf is a great act of courage. Ever since 9/11, tolerance for the people of the Islamic faith has gone down immensely. My friends, I cannot tell you how much harassment I, as well as countless other women with the veil, have gotten. I cannot tell you how many dirty looks I have received from random strangers. I cannot tell you how many “terrorist” jokes I have heard. But that's the beauty of it. That's the courageousness of it. I have had the opportunity to not wear my headscarf and live the life of a “normal teenage girl”. But I don't want that. Many people ask me “if I could, would I remove it?” My headscarf has grown to help me find myself, and made me into who I am today. My headscarf not only makes me feel closer to God, but it defines me. Without my headscarf I feel incomplete and disoriented, I feel naked. Despite the weird looks I get at the supermarket or the mall. So the answer to that question is nope, never, not in a million years. All those looks that I get, all the whispers flying around me, all the accusations, all the criticism, all the hate, only makes me stronger. Instead of taking offense or calling people out for glaring at me, I only smile at them, hoping that someday they will understand that Islam means peace. That I am a peaceful person. That I wore the headscarf because I wanted to, not because I was forced. I cannot tell you how many people have asked me if my father or mother have forced me to wear it. It was one hundred percent *my* decision and a decision that I don't, and will never regret in all of the days of my life. My headscarf started out with being a simple cloth, wrapped around my head, and has become truly, a part of me.

# Courage

## By Dania Shoukfeh

On a cold morning in early December 2004, I awoken to the bright sun's light shining through the bare windows of my cozy bed. Today was the day I promised myself that I would do it. Today I would have to muster up the courage to face my peers at school and I would enjoy the pride of my friends and family. I jumped out of bed and ran to my parent's room. "Wake up" I tell them; "today is Eid" (an Islamic holiday). Not waiting for an answer, I scramble back to my room. Opening the closet, I look for my newest clothes and hurry to put them on. Then, after carefully combing my hair, I opened my drawer and took out the headscarf.

And, to this day I have never taken it off. Except when I'm at home of course. When I first made the decision to wear the hijab (as it is called in Arabic) I was overjoyed as well as nervous. It was a promise to myself, my religion and my family. This headscarf from now on would be my new entry point to the world. My decision however was made and my resolve to stick to that decision was firm. I would cover myself and show only my dignity and personality to others. Then after judging my personality from this, they would have to decide how they would treat me. I had decided to re-enter the world as a Muslim girl completely devoted to her religion.

On that Eid of 2004, after attending the mosque that morning, my father decided to have us swing by the school so I could quickly get the homework missed from that day. I walked into the class as show and tell was going on. I could tell my presence had made an impression on some because as I walked over to the homework bin, some of them pointed to their head and gave me a confused look. I smiled not wanting to interrupt the presentation and whispered "I'll tell you later". The teacher also looked a bit intrigued but smiled and wished me a happy holiday.

Because we live in America, and Muslims don't have a very good reputation here anyway; I was scared I was going to get yelled at by my teachers or shunned by my friends at school when they saw my new

appearance. It was the middle of the year so I knew that I had literally 'changed overnight'. I knew that people would see me differently now and I must admit, I was worried. I was worried that I would be called names or get pushed around. I would have to sit alone at lunch and burn with embarrassment when people laughed. I would still have my Muslim friends to hang out with but having to spend seven hours in a building with people staring at you like a new exhibit is not fun.

The next day, when I came to school it was a different experience. Well, not only because my head was warmer but because I didn't know what to expect. My parents had advised me to tell the teacher if anyone started to bother me and I had practiced what to say when people asked why I wore it. After taking a deep breath I walked into Van Hise Elementary School and into my fourth grade class. Just as I walked in, the other kids crowded around me to ask me what I had on my head and if I was sick or not. (I didn't know how 'popular' I was until that day) Calmly I explained that it was part of my religion and that now that I was old enough to do so, I had decided to wear the hijab to preserve my modesty and show my pride in Islam. Some of them asked if they would be able to see my hair ever again and I told them, probably no. After that day of questions, the rest of the school year sailed by smoothly. I did always get more inquiries but no one has ever harassed me in school so far.

Others have to adjust to your beliefs and practices. It can't always have to be you who makes the unnecessary sacrifices to please others. Whatever you decide to do whether it be life changing or not; it should be done because you understand its significance and benefits. Don't have that 'kind of' attitude. If what you're doing is for the right reasons and with a firm attitude, then putting your foot down to do it will be much easier than you think.



# What is Courage?

By Zaid Sohail

Many people define courage in various words like Audacity, Bravery and Nerve etc. They may say Courage is what you show when you're scared, and that is a reasonable definition. The actual definition of courage is that it is the quality of mind or spirit that enables a person to face difficulty, danger and pain without fear. People show courage in difficult conditions and in various circumstances.

I have seen many people presenting themselves with courage in front of a crowd (as I am doing in front of you right now). Courage is not simply doing something that you are scared to do, it's a personal challenge. When we commit to do something, then we should not think of how many people are there and what they may say about us. We should stay persistent in what we are trying to do and convey the message with confidence. The most important thing is that if we don't overcome this shortfall then this will become a challenge and will always haunt throughout our life.

I use courage everyday as I have to deal so many challenges in the life. But the most courageous thing I can remember was when I stood firm to full fill my religious obligations in school and told people about my religion Islam. This all started when I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade at O'Keeffe Middle School. My parents had already told me about the importance of daily prayers and being a Muslim, I have this obligation to pray five times a day. Since one of those prayers fell in during the school time, so it was a challenge for me to fulfill my faith without affecting my studies. Initially I was afraid to pray in school as I didn't know how I should ask my teachers or how they would respond to my request. It was a struggle inside me, because I wanted to pray and I was scared too.

I talked to my dad for his advice. We discussed about it for a while, my dad told me how he prayed at his job, how he went to his boss to explain the obligation of prayer. Just listening to my dad gave me the hint of courage. I decided to request my teachers to give me a place where I would pray. I went to my teacher's room to explain my requirement. It was surprising to know that the teacher was interested in learning why we have to pray every day. The teacher told me that she had no problem with it, but we had to ask the office. So the next day I brought my dad and he talked to the administration and they happily allowed me to pray in the school. The next day I happily prayed before class started and felt so relief that I had faced this challenge with bravery. It was really a big achievement for me, but there was another obstacle that I need to crossover and that was every Friday prayer, which

is also an obligation but once a week only but in addition 5 daily prayers.

After praying for a while, my parents and I decided to take me to the Friday prayer on Friday. Once again we asked my teachers and they happily agreed with a commitment that I will complete all my work that I may have missed. Soon everyone started noticing why I was missing a little bit of class and every other Friday. They came up and asked me questions. I explained to them about Islam and why I had to pray five times a day. I also told them the different pillars of Islam such as Shahadah which is the oath to accepting the Islam, Salah which we pray five times a day, Zakah which is the regular charity to the poor, Hajj which is the pilgrimage to Meckka and Sawm or fasting during the month of Ramadan. I noticed that some people were interested in learning a little bit more about Islam, and some people who had negative views about Islam changed their ways.

Then, I started High school after that where some people called negative words, but I did not pay much attention, thinking that it would soon be over. I suffered almost every day being called terrorist. But soon the condition got worse and I was called words that I did not expect. One day while attending a local Masjid, I learned more about inner courage. I focused on what the talk had been about and decided to act upon it. The next week when I went to school, they were still making fun of me, so I gathered up my courage and went to them and explained to them about the true Islam, I explained to them why I pray and why I fast and why I am a Muslim. I stayed there for a good 10 minutes explaining to them. After those ten minutes, I walked away with my friends. The next day I walked past those guys, they smiled at me and started a nice conversation. They explained to them about how they had learned information about Islam that they had no idea about. I smiled at them and started a friendly conversation. I soon finished up my freshman year of high school and from that point on, nobody made fun of me and no any more negative comments. I continued praying everyday and never missed a prayer during my current high school career.

Like I said, Courage is not simply doing something that you are scared to do, it's a personal challenge. When coming up to do something, you should not think of how many people are there and what some people might say about you. You should think that you can do this, because if you don't do this then the challenge will always haunt you for the rest of your life.

# Spotlight

## By Bayaan Thomas

Sweat started to accumulate in the palms of my hands. My breathing started to spiral out of control, my chest started to heave up and down. My throat felt dry. Oh, how great would it be if I could have water trickling down my throat at this very moment. What if I open my mouth and nothing comes out?

The low murmur of children echoed throughout the gym. There must have been at least five hundred students in the gym. One thousand eyes will be fixed on me with five hundred minds that could go in either direction that could be full of hatred or acceptance. The song, "Party in the USA" blared out from the gigantic speakers on either side of the gym. I plastered a smile on my face and moved my body according to the rhythm, pretending to enjoy myself. If only everyone could see what was brewing beneath my skin, a hurricane of self-doubt and fear. I thought I finally had accepted my identity for what it is. I am a multiracial, Muslim girl, trying to live the typical American teenage life. I try hard to fit in, telling people the things they wanted to hear. But I am different; I am never going to blend into the crowd of bland faces and beliefs. I will always be the red flag in the sea of white. Being multiracial is one thing in itself, but being a Muslim is another whole ordeal.

The lights started to dim, it was show time. "Breathe Bayaan, everything is going to be fine!" People will be judgmental, but everyone is entitled to their own opinion, there is nothing to worry about. But what if they hate me? What if they call me names? What if someone will yell out "Terrorist!?" I'm being dramatic, so just stop this nonsense. Quickly one by one of my precious peers in the Multico (Multicompany) group ran onto the center stage in the gym and recited their bit. Finally it was my turn. My legs took control and sprinted onto the stage. Hundreds of eyes were on me awaiting the information they greedily awaited.

"Hi guys! My name is Bayaan, I'm Black, Native American, Asian, and White and I love dinosaurs, rawr!" The crowd erupted in laughter as I ran off of the stage. I smiled to myself. That wasn't so bad. Maybe everything was going to work out. As the last member of Multico ran out onto the stage, "Hey guys! My name is James. I'm White and I love Star Wars!" The crowd exploded with laughter and applauded once again, "And this is the - MULTICO!" Our whole class shouted in unison. The audience howled in admiration. The light went out once again, but as soon as the lights went out, the blinding beams of lights were turned back on. Our routine of lining up as t-shirt color, skin color, and favorite superhero was put in motion. It finally came down to stating out religions. This was it. I was going to expose myself for who I really was. I was going to take off this mask that I've been hiding behind.

"Christian!" "Jewish!" "Unitarian!" "Buddhist!"

It was my turn. I swallowed back my nerves and opened my mouth hoping something would come out, "Muslim!" the sound came out. I looked around, waiting for looks of hatred, almost expecting them to come. As I looked through the crowd, there was not a single face that had the slightest hint of hatred. A smile began to creep onto my face; this was going to be an amazing eight weeks to come.

It has been a decade since 9/11, and I still have the fear of being attacked by individuals who discriminate against Islam. A lot has changed within these ten years, but there is still that feeling of doubt and insecurity that makes me feel as if I need to hide this part of me. As a result of Multico group at the West High School, I have become more comfortable with who I am. Performing in front of thousands of kids helped me realize that it is okay to be who you are. There may be those who will disagree with your beliefs, but you have to take that leap of faith and put yourself out there.

# Food Fiesta: Breaking Bread Together



# At the Finale - Helpers



# At the Finale...



# Courage Project T-shirt Design

Front Design:



Final Design:



Flyer for publicity:

# Got Courage? Fina

**COME SUPPORT OUR YOUTH ON:**

*Date: Sunday, May 8, 2011*

*Time: 3:00-5:00 pm*

*Place: Shorewood Elementary School  
1105 Shorewood Blvd.  
Madison, WI 53705*



**\*\* FREE ADMISSION TO PUBLIC \*\***

*The Courage Project* brings together high schoolers from the Abrahamic faiths: Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and facilitates dialogues between these teens culminating in a FINALE ~ a public theatrical presentation and performance that deals with the theme ~ *Courage*.

*Directed by:*

**Rohany Nayan**, Graduate Fellow at LISAR

**Pastor Katie Beardseth** of Midvale

Community Lutheran Church

**Cantor Deborah Martin** of Temple Beth El

*Sponsored by:*



**Lubar Institute**

for the Study of the Abrahamic Religions  
University of Wisconsin-Madison

# Thanks to....



All the staff at the Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions, Mr. & Mrs. Keith D. Nosbusch, Sheldon & Marianne Lubar, the participants, their families, the UW-Merit Library and members of the Jewish, Christian and Muslim communities.



## Abrahamic Faiths:

*The term "Abrahamic" refers to the family of religious traditions that hold Abraham in special regard, emphasizing their affinities rather than their differences.*

### Project Coordinators:

Rohany Nayan  
*Graduate Fellow at LISAR*  
 Cantor Deborah Martin  
*Of Temple Beth El*  
 Pastor Katie Baardseth  
*Of Midvale Lutheran Church*

### Project Assistants:

Brenda Gobble  
 Ora Ben Ami  
 Naman Siad

**Midvale Community  
 Lutheran Church-ELCA**  
 4329 Tokay Boulevard  
 Madison, WI 53711

**Islamic Center**  
 21 N Orchard St.  
 Madison, WI 53715

**Temple Beth El**  
 2702 Arbor Drive  
 Madison, WI 53711-1825



*(Left) Sculpture: "The Children of Abraham" by Phillip Ratner (2007)*

Adorned with renderings of "Abraham" lettered in the scriptural languages of Hebrew, Greek, and Arabic, as well as Latin, the "Children of Abraham" evokes the historic, theological, and even consanguineous connections between Jews, Christians and Muslims. The sculpture was dedicated on November 8, 2007, at the Chazen Museum of Art and permanently installed in the courtyard of the Mosse Humanities Building, UW-Madison campus.

