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News / GTA

Muslim charities look to give back locally

Toronto's Muslim Welfare Centre has led the trend, but other Islamic charities are now following suit, after years of focusing on international aid.



VINCE TALOTTA / TORONTO STAR [Order this photo](#)
From left, coordinator Tahmina Begum and administrator Sherri Sieh of the Highcastle school snack program for elementary students accept a ceremonial cheque from the Muslim Welfare Centre's executive director, Shahid Khan, and manager of special projects, Firaaz Azeez.

By: **Noor Javed** News reporter, Published on Mon Jan 05 2015
By the time breakfast was served, Firaaz Azeez was convinced.

Azeez, a manager at the Muslim Welfare Centre, a local charity based in Scarborough, was on a tour of city schools to see the student nutrition program, run by the Toronto Foundation for Student Success, at work.

"I was amazed by what I saw," said Azeez. He was tasked with deciding if his charity should increase funding to the local breakfast programs. "Beyond the food that is nourishing all these kids, there are student volunteers who prepare and cook the meals," he said.

The student nutrition program has been operating in schools across the Toronto District School Board since 1999. By next year, the program, run by the charitable arm of the TDSB, will feed kids breakfast, snack or lunch in almost a thousand schools across the city. This year, the Muslim Welfare Centre will fund the programs in 14 schools in the city's least affluent neighbourhoods, including Malvern, Thorncliffe Park and Regent Park. Their donation of \$30,000 will feed more than 4,500 students, according to Catherine Parsonage, executive director of the TFSS.

"It's the difference between kids having fresh fruit or milk," said Parsonage. "The money allows the schools to buy the food they are short on," she said.

Traditionally, Muslims, who consider charity a fundamental part of their faith, have looked overseas to support charitable initiatives — often in their country of origin. But the Muslim Welfare Centre's involvement in local programs is forcing attitudes within the community to change. The charity is the first Muslim organization to partner with the student nutrition program, according to Parsonage. And as more donors look to give back locally, Muslim Welfare's initiatives are encouraging other charities to follow suit.

Quite simply, it comes down to demographics, says Ziyaad Mia, a Toronto-based lawyer who spearheaded Ramadan 30, an initiative focused on raising donations for food banks during the Islamic month of Ramadan.

"Toronto has 10 per cent Muslims, and in the hard-hit areas of the city, a lot of the people are Muslims," said Mia, whose campaign has raised nearly \$250,000 in three years, and funds food banks all across the country.

Thorncliffe Park and Regent Park, for example, have significant numbers of residents

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from the predominantly Muslim countries of Pakistan and Bangladesh, according to data from the 2011 Census. Immigration, combined with precarious employment and the high cost of housing, have left many newcomers struggling to afford the basics for their families, such as food, says Mia.

“There is a yearning among young Muslims looking to donate to charities that are local, that are Canadian and organic. The Muslim Welfare Centre has been a leader in that regard,” said Mia.

The Muslim Welfare Centre was founded in 1993 by Muhammad “Major” Abbas Ali, and his wife, Sarwar Jahan Begum. The couple started with a small halal food bank in Scarborough that was open to anyone in need. A few years later, the couple started a 45-bed family shelter in Whitby for women and children. It remains the only family shelter in Durham Region.

“Major Abbas used to say to me, if we take people’s money here in Canada, we need to use it in Canada,” said Azeez. “More and more, I hear our supporters tell us they support us because we are visible in the local community,” he said. The group recently launched a successful Sunday lunch program in Regent Park that feeds hundreds of local residents. It runs a halal Meals on Wheels program for Muslim seniors, and hands out hundreds of lunches to the city’s homeless every weekend.

Inspired, other Canadian Islamic charities such as Islamic Relief Canada are also making domestic projects a priority. In 2014, Islamic Relief Canada gave significant financial contribution to the Daily Bread Food Bank and the Flemingdon Food Bank; to the Sick Kids Foundation for training of Palestinian doctors; and Habitat for Humanity, to build affordable housing for underprivileged families.

For 2015, the charity has “budgeted a significant amount of funds to assist domestically, including in the sectors of food security, refugee services, health, education and social services,” said Ahtsham Yousaf, a spokesman for Islamic Relief.

Yousaf says that change of focus comes from a “realization of a civic responsibility to assist local communities. Oftentimes, with so much suffering around the world, we forget that there is a great deal of poverty in communities across Canada,” he said.

Parsonage is hopeful other Muslim organizations and faith-based groups will take inspiration from the Muslim Welfare Centre.

The breakfast program feeds 150,000 every day, said Parsonage. It takes about \$9 million a year to run the Toronto Foundation for Student Success’s breakfast programs, which cost roughly \$1.30 per student per day. Thirty cents is covered by governments, the rest through fundraising and charitable donations to the foundation.

Parsonage says research done by the TDSB in 2012 found that as many as 68 per cent of students were coming to school without breakfast. The study of 6,000 students found that when kids were fed breakfast, “magic things started to happen,” said Parsonage. “Math scores went up, reading scores went up, attendance improved, and even suspensions fell in half,” she said.

“In a country as affluent as Canada in 2014, it’s unbelievable to me that children don’t have enough food,” said Parsonage. “We think of hunger as something that happens overseas, but the reality is, it’s a problem right here at home.”

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How much goes overseas to aid Islamic war organizations ? This is just a distraction for the real business at hand. I am sure an audited investigation will reveal huge divergence of funds to questionable and even illegal operations.

2 hours ago (edited) 1 Like



Satamby

This is very commendable on behalf of the muslim community.

3 hours ago 2 Likes



lilmom

most of these schools have a high percentage of Muslim students so it goes to boost their "programming"...hope you like Halal eggs...along with your morning prayers...remember all the girls to the back of the rooms.

5 hours ago 2 Likes



Aragom II

I bet you don't get sausage egg English muffins for breakfast with this charity.

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