

“Why are you wearing a scarf on your head?” At first it was an innocent question, a respectful curiosity. Until it wasn’t.

Growing up in an era where everyday people became more dependent on iPhones and social media, Asha Zein, freshman, noticed stereotypes being formed about her and all Muslims.

“The media, in general, put a bad stereotype on Muslims because of what has been happening in the world,” Asha Zein, freshman, said. “I get looked at differently because of that; it’s hard to go about my daily life with people staring at me when they don’t know me as a person. People are usually a little hesitant to talk to me because I don’t look like your average Kirkwood girl.”

Asha’s parents traveled from Somalia to the United States in order to escape the war going on around them in 1997. However, Asha said her family, including her five siblings, had to face a rough transition in how they practiced Islam.

“In Somalia, [my parents] were surrounded by Muslims and there were mosques everywhere. [Muslims] pray five times a day, and they all [prayed] together as a family” Asha said, whose family continues to pray five times a day. “Now it’s harder because [they’re] surrounded with a community that’s not all Muslim.”

Najma Omar, sophomore, became a good friend of Asha’s at the beginning of her sophomore year. She faced a similar transition when she moved from Kenya to the United States in 2006 when she was only 7 years old.

“[The religious culture in Kenya] is much more casual than [the United States]. You don’t even notice it because there’s so many Muslims there. It’s a culture more than a religion,” Najma said. “Here, it’s not a culture, it’s a decision. You see how other people live. There are so many different viewpoints. The fact that you still choose to follow one type of viewpoint [is more significant].”

Asha said the most difficult part about being a Muslim in the U.S., a 1 percent minority, was the way they were portrayed through the media.

“One of the things I try my hardest to get across is that not all people are the same. Everyone makes their own choices,” Asha said. “I don’t know any Muslims that own guns, so it throws me off when people think we’re terrorists or extremists. No one from my family has ever held a gun or come close to one.”

Najma and Asha met each other at Asha’s mosque, Abubakar Sadiq, and ended up finding out they were distantly related to each other by marriage.

“In Kirkwood we don’t have that many Muslims. It gets really lonely. I have a lot of friends, and I love my friends, but there’s things they can’t understand,” Najma said. “Having Asha and other Muslim kids around helps me to know I’m not the only person who deals with [discrimination]. There’s somebody else who lives around the same area, goes to the same school and goes through the same things I do. It helps me to know I’m not alone.”

Aysha and Najma believed in the faith, but there were some differences in how they practiced their religion.

“[Asha] does her own thing, and I do my own thing. [For example], we don’t dress the same way. She wears jeans, I don’t,” Najma said. “It strengthens my faith knowing there are other ways of practicing the exact same faith, and I really like that.”

Similarly, Asha found strength knowing that she had a big part of life in common with Najma.

“It feels good to have someone there that I can relate to,” Asha said. “Obviously, everybody believes different things, but having people the same religion as me that believe in the same faith makes me more confident with myself.”

Both Asha and Najma agreed the biggest source of what seemed to lead to discrimination was the media. While they both said they never encountered discrimination at KHS, they faced

judgement in other places. For example, Najma had customers who refused help from her at her job because of her Muslim appearance.

“People think horribly of [Muslims] because some people don’t know any better. Maybe their parents haven’t taught them the truth, their schools maybe don’t do inter-religion culture talks, and the only thing they have left is the media,” Najma said. “It’s everywhere, so people are constantly being influenced by it.”

Asha remembered people always asking her why she was wearing a scarf on her head as a child. She repeatedly explained it was a symbol of modesty. As she grew older and the media became more prevalent, she said the tone of the question turned from curiosity to judgement.

“I feel like, especially at this age, what we hear from media influences our thoughts and the things we believe. That changes how people look at Muslims,” Asha said. “If you just get to know me, you’ll see me as me, not what the media has people believing.”