

## SARA (SALLY) SEYAL

I have been an outgoing person all of my life and have enjoyed meeting people from various cities, backgrounds, cultures and religions. Raised in a small town in Illinois, I was involved in a Spanish Speaking Club in high school which worked with migrant workers teaching English, and also teaching some Spanish to elementary school children. My family hosted a foreign exchange student from Russia for a short time, and I had friends of many backgrounds in the Up With People 'Sing Out' group with which I performed. Since childhood I participated with groups helping people, charity functions, and enjoyed learning about other people's backgrounds and religions. One of my areas of interest in college was Middle Eastern Religions. In my professional career as a nurse I have encountered people from many religious and cultural backgrounds. My beloved parents were a wonderful example of faith, community service and volunteerism.

After graduating Phi Kappa Phi with a BSN from Illinois Wesleyan University Brokaw Collegiate School of Nursing, I moved to Chicago, where I met my husband Saleem, an immigrant physician from Pakistan, working at the same community teaching hospital. We married and I learned about being a Muslim and the religion of Islam. I met many people from various parts of the world working at the hospital: Philippines, Pakistan, India, Columbia, Mexico, and also new friends from the African-American community. I also learned about the holocaust from my many Jewish patients at the hospital with tattoos from their concentration camps, and their cultural and religious practices. I would hear painful racial, religious and ethnic slurs against African Americans, Jewish, Indian, Pakistani and Filipino people from patients, and - surprisingly - from staff as well.

After moving to Louisville, this beautiful mid-sized city we have grown to love, we raised our three children to be kind and accepting people. My children did experience occasional "bullying" due to their heritage and religion, and slightly "exotic" looks compared to most white children in the schools. I offered to present programs on Pakistan to the children's classes when the teachers were accepting. It was a very basic introduction to another culture from which my children's father came, and a country about which most people, let alone children, had heard anything. I quit my nursing career to raise my children full-time. For over 20 years I spent many hours as a volunteer in their schools, as classroom assistant, tutor, chaperone, PTA officer, band and sports team booster, Cub Scout, Girl Scout and Boy Scout leader. I received the "Champions for Children" award from JCPS for my volunteer work in the classrooms. I have also been a community volunteer with the Red Cross, Raptor Rehabilitation of Kentucky, and our Home Owners Association Board.

In the 1990's, due to the two Persian Gulf Wars, many people in our country "learned" about Muslims and Islam, but not in a good way. Having no or very little factual understanding of the peaceful religion, they associated it with terrorists, perceived oppression of women, and "uncivilized" culture. There were slurs and negative comments about our family. I honestly feared greatly for the safety of my family and wondered if we would have to quickly depart to a safer place, even kept a "go bag" of personal documents and money stashed, just in case. After September 11, 2001, the world changed for all of us. My children faced increased distrust among the student body. There were slurs, but fortunately they also had good friends to support them. The fear, then hatred, of Muslims continued to grow. Anti-Muslim propaganda from certain religious and political leaders, as well as Internet and cable news sources, disseminated misinformation about Islam, intensifying the fear and hatred towards Muslims. It has been a difficult and frightening time.

Islamophobia and fear and hatred of the “Other” has affected me personally, and when my husband and I were invited by Dr. Riffat Hassan to help with the newly formed *The Salaam Network* in 2016, we were drawn to its mission to dispel fear of diverse groups through education. It seemed to us that this educational network was much needed to help people learn to understand Islam and Muslims in their community through a fact-based, personal interactive series of programs. This would lead to the elimination of negative misconceptions and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam, and also bring out the commonalities amongst the three Abrahamic religions.

I have been the Communications Coordinator of *The Salaam Network* since 2016. I have assisted with certain secretarial duties and have endeavored to develop a basic communications system via email to contact community faith leaders, supporters of our organization and those interested in attending our presentations. I pray that my humble service can help make a difference in making our Beloved Community Whole.