

Students at Bucks County school create Muslim prayer space in Quaker meeting house

by Kristin E. Holmes, Updated: May 17, 2019- 5:30 AM



TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Saleema Walter and Anisgul Stanikzai traveled to [George School](#) in Bucks County from hometowns 6,800 miles apart, but when the students settled in at the Quaker institution's scenic 240-acre campus in Newtown, they missed the same things.

The absence of traditions associated with their Islamic faith — in North Brunswick, N.J., for Walter, and Jalalabad, Afghanistan, for Stanikzai — left a void that they filled by meeting their religion's obligations mostly alone.

“There are so many students on campus who are close to each other ethnically, culturally, or religiously,” said Walter, 17. “I would see that and wish I had it.”

So, the two decided to re-create the communal feeling they missed. Walter revived a dormant Islamic student association soon after she enrolled in 2015, and earlier this year, she teamed up with Stanikzai, 19, to transform a part of a historic Quaker meeting house on the campus into a place where she and other Muslim students could feel at home.

The two students, seniors set to graduate May 26, turned part of the balcony of the 207-year-old house of worship erected by the [Religious Society of Friends](#) into a Muslim prayer space. The small section, which had been used for storage, is now defined by a billowy blue curtain. Inside are prayer rugs, Qurans, and strings of beads to be held when making holy petitions while crouched and facing Mecca.



TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A curtain defines the new prayer space for Muslim students and faculty on the George School campus in Newtown, Pa. The space is inside the Quaker school's historic meeting house.

Stanikzai calls it “the best moment to have a place dedicated to our religion,” which is practiced by about 15 students.

George School’s Quaker roots made not only the accommodation, but the location inside a meeting house, an easy call, said J. Samuel Houser, head of school. The religion is not dogmatic, he said, “We believe there is God in everyone.”

Founded in 1893, George School is a boarding and day school with 547 students who this year come from 22 states and 44 countries. They represent 22 faith traditions, practicing Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Confucianism, and no religion at all.

They are required to attend a Quaker meeting for worship at least once a week, when they sit in silence with faculty and staff, and stand to share their thoughts, “if the spirit leads them,” said Tom Hoopes, head of the school’s religions department. So far, the school has been free of tensions rooted in faith differences, Houser said, but students are aware of news outside the bucolic campus.



TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

The Quaker meeting house on the George School campus.

“We are actually encouraging students to be on a spiritual journey wherever they are,” said Hoopes. At George School, students have observed Jewish holidays, Ramadan, and Lunar New Year, a cultural holiday that can have religious significance.

As freshman, Walter and Stanikzai moved to the campus and were overwhelmed with homesickness and longing for familiar Islamic traditions.

“I knew there were Muslim students here, but we didn’t come together for any events or holidays,” Stanikzai said. “Being together with everyone who is a part of our culture, it helps with homesickness.”

Walter’s brother, Zaid, who graduated in 2014, co-founded the Alliance for Learning about Islam (ALI) student group during his time at George School, but ALI no longer was active when Saleema

arrived. Soon after, she began sending out emails in an effort to revive it. Eventually, after two years and more Muslim student enrollment, the group's activity increased.

For the holy month of Ramadan, which began May 5 and ends June 4, students awake to meet in the TV room at 3:30 a.m., eat dates, fruit and oatmeal before they start their daily fast, and then return to the room at 8 p.m. to break their fast together.



TIM TAI / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A prayer rug in the new prayer space for Muslim students and faculty on the George School campus.

Last Fall, Stanikzai talked with Walter about asking administrators for a place of their own. The students approached Houser and Marcus Ingram, the school's director of inclusion, with their idea, and they agreed.

For the Islamic prayer space, the balcony of the meeting house — quiet and accessible — seemed a good fit, Houser said.

George School's meeting house was originally located on 12th Street near Market Street in Philadelphia. In the early 1970s, the house of worship was scheduled to be torn down, but was saved by benefactors who arranged for it to be moved — in pieces — from Philadelphia to George School's campus.

Through the years, the meeting house has been used not only for Quaker worship, but for Jewish observances and community meetings.

To prepare the space, students, their families, and residents of Pennswood Village, a Quaker senior community adjacent to the school, donated rugs, Qurans, books, and curtains. The school spent less than \$500 to transform it, and the prayer space was dedicated in a ceremony last month.

“It was very overwhelming emotionally to be in a place that feels so much like home,” Walter said. “After a long day of classes, it’s a break away from the stress of senior year. I come here, get out a rug, and it gives me peace.

Now that the school has made space for Muslim students, it will be ready for other similar requests, Houser said.

“If students let us know what they want, and we can do it,” he said, “we will.”

<https://www.philly.com/news/george-school-prayer-room-muslim-islam-quaker-meeting-house-20190517.html>