



NADIA KIDWAI



#ModestMuslimActivist

Let's be clear: I am not an activist. Or a leader. Frankly, it looks exhausting.

I would much rather sit on my sofa and finish watching all six seasons of *The Good Wife* on Netflix before someone gives away the ending on Facebook.

The problem is: I am kind of in the business of activism and leadership. In fact, I'm surrounded by a bunch of amazing activists #AllDay #EveryDay. This may have something to do with the fact that I am the program coordinator of Next Up in Winnipeg. No wonder activists and leaders are everywhere.

What makes me more uncomfortable is when others tell me that I am a leader or an activist. And in true British fashion, I feel the immediate need to deny such an accusation. No thank YOU.

And yet in my job, we spend a substantial amount of time discussing how there are all kinds of leaders and activists. That in Next Up, leadership is about inspiring others to work for a common goal and how we all have the potential to be leaders — with diverse leadership styles and spheres of influence. So I suppose, in that capacity, perhaps I should actually believe what I tell other people.

But despite not knowing if I really belong in this world, I can very clearly see how I got here.

OUR SCHOOLS/OUR SELVES

I was born and raised in Wales. My parents emigrated to the U.K. in the 70s from Pakistan — my mother moved to pursue her undergraduate degree and then PhD in chemistry, and my father to study accounting. My siblings and I were raised as Muslims but it wasn't until I reached my early teens that we as a family began to really study our faith and grow together spiritually.

Our increased commitment to our faith began to manifest itself outwardly. For example, despite being well into their 50s, my mother decided that she wanted to wear the hijab and my father grew a (fairly dashing but pious) beard. At 16, I knew that I wanted to wear the hijab, but there was no way I was going to do that in the middle of high school. (Being brown was different enough, thanks very much.)

So, at 18 years old after finishing high school, I felt the best time to start wearing the hijab was the summer before I left for university. I was leaving Wales and heading to Oxford and it seemed like a perfect time to start a new phase in my life: Muslim Nadia! And so, I donned my most modest, school-teacher looking outfits and started wearing the hijab in August, 2001.

One month later, 9/11 happened. Almost immediately, I became a walking-talking advert for Islam and Muslims everywhere.

And thus is the story of how I stumbled into this work: Reluctantly, unexpectedly and at times, feeling rather fraudulent.

All of a sudden, people wanted to know what it was like to be a "Muslim in the West, post 9-11". I felt that that could have been my official job title on a business card. I was given a platform, albeit one that I didn't ask for. Being a visible Muslim woman made me all the more coveted. Muslim women in the media were often depicted as oppressed, meek, and subservient. People seemed to be surprised that I could crack a joke, articulate my comfort with being both British and a Muslim ... even reference the Kardashians and other such societal ills.

And yet, I felt like a fraud. After moving to Winnipeg in 2004 (it's a long story and for another publication altogether), I was suddenly being asked to speak on inter-faith panels and do radio interviews and speak to high-school kids, always around the same topics: Islam, Muslim, Hijab, Terrorism (sometimes the order changed a bit). I felt there was this perception that because of 9/11 and being a "hijabi", that I had personally suffered oppression, racism, Islamophobia.

On the contrary, I honestly felt that much of the public response to 9/11 resulted in opportunities and responsibilities that I may not otherwise have had. I had grown up in a white, upper-middle class neighbourhood in the U.K., studied at Oxford University, I even used to listen to Coldplay. I really did not feel I had the right or the experience to advocate on behalf of marginalised, targeted Muslim communities.

I felt a lot of pressure. I remember not being able to sleep the night before my first CBC radio interview. I felt a great responsibility in speaking on behalf of the entire Muslim world everywhere, in “defending” my faith and the Qur’an and the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). It was a lot of weight to carry and I began to see how the pressure to “speak up” always fell on the same handful of people in the community. I felt there needed to be a forum or space to build capacity among Canadian Muslims, where we could transfer knowledge and leadership skills between generations. Against the backdrop of a Harper government, one that identified “Islamicism as the biggest security threat to Canada”, the need to pave the way for a new kind of narrative about Muslims in Canada became all the more urgent.

This was the genesis of the Canadian Muslim Leadership Institute, a program I co-founded with Martin Itzkow, a leadership consultant with 20 years of experience. We coordinated a leadership program specifically for Canadian Muslims designed around values related to self-discovery, community empowerment and inter-cultural community organizing. It wasn’t a “religious” program, it was a leadership program grounded in the Canadian Muslim experience.

After four successful years of CMLI, with over 50 young Canadian Muslims from across the country graduating from the program, Martin and I decided to move on. That is when the opportunity to be program coordinator for Next Up’s brand new program in Winnipeg came my way. It seemed perfect, pretty much exactly what I had been doing with CMLI. But there was this new component that I was not familiar with. Environment. Climate. They meant recycling and stuff, right? I was down with that.

One and a half years and two cohorts later, I reflect on what I have learnt from Next Up and how it has impacted me as a decidedly non-activist activist. Before Next Up, I had no idea how interconnected climate change and environmental issues were to other social jus-

tice issues: Indigenous rights, anti-oppression, political and economic justice. It seems that now, more than ever, the struggle for social change is about as multi-faceted as it can get. That if you want to be effective in tackling one issue, you have to at least be conscious of how intricately it is connected to others. Climate change is no longer a conversation relegated to the fringes, but has become increasingly

part of the common vernacular.

Likewise, Islamophobia is a deep issue that environmentalists need to be aware of if we are to build a more just world while we reinvent our systems to respond to climate change.

Beyond how my experience has shaken up my awareness of environmental issues and my

self-perception, Next Up has also deeply impacted me as a parent. I have two young sons who have always shown an interest in politics ever since they were toddlers and would excitedly yell out "OBAMA!" every time a Black man came on the TV.

By virtue of being the coordinator, I attended every Next Up session. I learned alongside participants and in doing so came to hear about things called "anti-oppression" and "climate justice", "decolonisation training", "Overton window", and "spectrum of allies". What were these concepts?

I took what I learnt at these sessions back to the kitchen table and did what every good mother does: brainwashed my children. It's not easy raising two young feminist, politically engaged, socially aware Canadian Muslim men, you know.

And perhaps it's in that realm that I feel most comfortable being called a leader and an activist: in my role as a mother. It's during my conversations with my children (and because of my children) about these issues that I am the most engaged, most animated, and most excited. Because of Next Up, my eyes are being opened and all I want to do is to share these new perspectives with my boys. Sadly, despite my brainwashing skills, my boys are not afraid to push back. Critical thinking skills are all very well, but would be much more convenient if the kids could reserve those for after they've grown up and moved

If you want to be effective in tackling one issue, you have to at least be conscious of how intricately it is connected to others.

out. The point is, we are now having conversations, real conversations around oppressive structures, climate, feminism, and more, which I'm not sure we would have, had I not been involved in the work that I do.

So, is parenting activism a thing? Some ridiculous mum has probably already started a blog on it. Maybe I should just skip ahead and ask Next Up's leadership about starting a "Next, Next Up".

I'm slowly coming around to the idea that maybe I do have a place in the activism world. Between being a single mother and working full time, I definitely do not have the energy or time to attend all the rallies and events and lectures that are plastered across my newsfeed, each demanding immediate attention. And I may not have faced the same oppression and attacks my fellow Muslim sisters most decidedly have. But I have been given opportunities. And I have a voice. And I am an expert — with over 33 years of experience — in my own life. I recognise that I have something to share and that we all have something to share. We just need to step up and share it.

So for all you reluctant activists and definitely-not-a-leader leaders out there, know that there is at least one person like you living in this world and probably many, many more. We'll have to somehow figure out a way to feel comfortable here, because for change to happen, they need us, God damn it.

Welsh Muslim Winnipegger **NADIA KIDWAI** is a journalist, community organizer and program coordinator of Next Up Winnipeg.