Mercy, Faith & Relaxation

A group for HIV-positive Muslims holds its first retreat.

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In Arabic, the word rahma means mercy. But in the United States, RAHMA is an acronym for Reaching All HIV+ Muslims in America, an organization that offers support to HIV-positive Muslims and works to reduce HIV stigma within that community.

“I wanted mercy to be my guiding principle for the work that I do,” says Khadijah Abdullah, who founded RAHMA in 2012. “I wanted my community to have compassion, because the first person I met who was Muslim and had AIDS said he had experienced stigma, judgment, isolation; he was afraid to disclose his status because of how he felt people would react.”

As taking drugs, having premarital sex and engaging in non-heterosexual relationships are frowned upon in traditional Islamic beliefs, many members within the Muslim community deny the fact that Muslims are also at risk for contracting HIV. This attitude has led to a lasting stigma toward HIV-positive Muslims within the community, encouraging judgment, loneliness and isolation. RAHMA has taken on the challenge to address stigma and is seeing change.

RAHMA is based in Washington, DC—where in August it held its first retreat—but the group connects with people across the country through social media and a series of workshops, free testing sessions and events that provide support and education for Muslims of all backgrounds.

The inaugural retreat focused on self-care and included workshops, yoga and meditation. “If you don’t have self-care, you can’t do anything else,” Abdullah explains. “Your health has priority over you—mental health, physical health, emotional health, spiritual health—so it’s important to take care of that.”

In order to keep the environment intimate and nonintimidating, only about 20 people were admitted to this year’s retreat, though future events might be open to more participants. “I came because I wanted to be around Muslims who share the same virus I have,” says one attendee who wished to remain anonymous. “And even ones who don’t have [HIV] have information that I need. This is a safe space where we can talk about it.”

To learn more, visit haverahma.org.

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