

# My Name is Bilal

*Former Marion resident writes book about Muslim-American experience*

By Kurt Moore - **The Marion Star**

Article published Aug 28, 2005

MARION - Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin went on a search for books for her children which she could read and say, "Hey, they're Muslim-Americans just like you." What she discovered was such books aren't numerous, and many she found she said offered false depictions of the faith and its followers.

So, she sat down and wrote her own book.

"My Name is Bilal," the culmination of her work, was published this month by Boyds Mills Press. It centers around Bilal, a Muslim child who struggles with his identity as he and his sister transfer to a school where they are the only Muslim students.

The book is offered through Amazon.com and will soon be carried by Moloney's Books in downtown Marion.

It is the first book for Mobin-Uddin, a former Pleasant Local Schools student and Marion Catholic High School graduate who now serves as vice-president of the Ohio Chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations. She hopes it will encourage both children and adults to discuss issues related to religious and ethnic diversity.

Her main goals in writing the book were providing positive portrayals of Muslim-Americans for Muslim children and exposing the American public to factual depictions of Muslims.

"There's not anything out there to address this experience," Mobin-Uddin said.

She said the book was rooted in her own struggles as a child. While she didn't experience such things as people pulling on her head scarf as Bilal's sister experienced in the book, she said it was a struggle to balance where she fit in among her peers while staying true to her heritage and home life.

Her diet differed from American children because Muslims do not eat pork, and interactions between males and females are also more constrained.

"Some things like that I was trying to sort out," Mobin-Uddin said.

The former Marion resident said she had many positive experiences while going to school. She said her parents enrolled her in Marion Catholic High School because they felt people who respect God would respect her and her own faith.

"I did do a lot of answering questions," she said. "I had to think, 'Why do we do these things?'"

Many questions were harmless, such as why she didn't eat pepperoni on her pizza.

"I think people were generally pretty accepting," she said. "They were educated about it just by having me as their classmate."

Mobin-Uddin now has three children of her own. The oldest, who's 6, attends an Islamic school in Columbus that adds Islamic studies and the Arabic language to its curriculum.

She came back to Marion a year ago to speak to a group of former Pleasant Elementary School teachers. Mary Gruber, the school's librarian



*The Marion Star/James Miller*

Dr. Asma Mobin-Uddin is the author of the children's book "My Name is Bilal." The pediatrician and Marion Catholic graduate is an observant Muslim living in Columbus.

at the time, and Mabel Cheetham, her third-grade math teacher, said they remembered her being a delightful student and a role model. Cheetham called her an ideal student who loved to learn.

“If she had feelings of being different we didn’t know,” said Cheetham, who said Mobin-Uddin was well-liked. “She was just one of our many students.”

While Mobin-Uddin’s story is fictional, a local Muslim mother said such experiences as described in the book are not uncommon.

Ambreen Khan’s 9-year-old daughter, Ramisha, attends Pleasant Elementary School where she is in the fifth grade. The family moved to Marion from Philadelphia in October.

Khan (the ‘K’ is silent) said her child has had some issues because of her differences. She can be hesitant to make friends because she is different. She sometimes hides from her friends when she gets into the car and her mom is dressed in the traditional Muslim garb, which includes the head scarf.

Khan shares stories from the Koran, the Muslim holy book, and literature about their Asian heritage with Ambreen. She tells her daughter to explain to the other children who she is and that she is Muslim.

“One thing about children, they are very innocent,” Khan said. “If you tell them they will understand.”

Khan said she remembers when she went to high school some of the Muslim children would hide their identity, trying to fit into society.

“It is kind of hard,” she said of being another ethnicity and religion as a child. “If you’re not ashamed of it I don’t think it’s a problem.”

Mobin-Uddin said she hopes to encourage children, no matter their ethnicity, to be true to their values and themselves and not to be swayed by what others think of them.

“You don’t have to change in order to fit in with everybody,” she said.