

Buffalo's Muslims Battle Stereotype After Murder

by DINA TEMPLE-RASTON

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It only took a Buffalo, N.Y., jury an hour earlier this month to find Muzzamil "Mo" Hassan, the founder of a Muslim-oriented suburban television station, guilty of beheading his wife, Aasiya. The killing received national attention not just because it was brutal — but because both the killer and his victim were Muslim.

When Aasiya Hassan was murdered in 2009, some journalists immediately jumped to the conclusion that it was an honor killing — but it wasn't. And the Muslim community in the Buffalo area has been fighting the stereotype for the last two years.

A Stunning Murder

A decade ago, you'd be hard pressed to find a more high-profile Muslim couple in Western New York than Mo and Aasiya Hassan. They lived in Orchard Park, a wealthy suburb just outside of Buffalo — and they owned the local 7-Eleven, so everyone seemed to know them. Then in 2004, the Hassans started Bridges TV. They called it a "Muslim lifestyle network," and as they envisioned it, it was meant to help Muslims and non-Muslims understand each other and develop an appreciation for different cultures.



Enlarge

David Duprey/AP

In this March 13, 2009 file photo, Muzzammil Hassan, convicted of beheading his estranged wife after she filed for a

So when Mo Hassan, the man who was supposed to be Buffalo's friendly face of Islam, murdered his wife, it stunned a community.

"It's not only that he killed his wife — it was the way he killed her that was so despicable," said Dr. Khalid Qasi, one of the leaders of the Muslim community in Buffalo. "Nobody in the community can get their arms around the notion that he would not only kill her — he would stab her 40, 50, perhaps 60 times and then decapitate her. There is absolutely no stomach for that."

The combination of Aasiya Hassan's religion, the way she was killed and the fact that she had filed for divorce just days before the murder made it easy to jump to conclusions, and people did. Some journalists assumed that the killing was sanctioned by Islamic law — that Aasiya had dishonored her family by filing for divorce and paid for that with her life.

That story line, said Qazi, was everywhere.

divorce, appears at his arraignment in Erie County Court in Buffalo, N.Y.

"There was this constant reminder of this monster who we all tried to project and help to establish a lifestyle television channel to show who we are

and what we stand for — and then we get this," he said.

Battling A Stereotype

Buffalo's Muslim community already had its share of these kinds of stories. There were suspicions after the Sept. 11 attacks and then a year later six young Muslims from Lackawanna, a community just outside of Buffalo, were arrested for being America's first sleeper cell. Eventually they pleaded guilty to training at an al-Qaida camp. The young men never planned anything against the United States, but against the post-Sept. 11 backdrop, stereotyping became easy. Just as they were seen as terrorists, the murder of Aasiya Hassan was seen as an honor killing.

Remla Parthasarathy, an instructor at the Women, Children, and Social Justice Clinic at University at Buffalo Law School, says the Hassan murder was a clear-cut case of domestic abuse.

"Honor killings are something that is sanctioned and approved by the extended family, that wasn't the case here," she said. "Religious leaders in the Muslim community came out and denounced it and they said it wasn't an honor killing and I respect that."

In fact, no one could recall ever seeing Mo Hassan at the mosque.

As time went on, Muslim community leaders were presented with a stark choice: either allow others to stereotype the community or move aggressively to redefine the killing. They came up with a novel approach: embark on a domestic violence education campaign that allowed them to battle the honor killing stereotype while at the same time providing new protection for battered women in the community.

Domestic abuse had been an issue in the immigrant and Muslim communities of Western New York all along. But according to Kathy Jamil, the principal of a local Islamic school, it was something that was kept under wraps.

No one wanted to admit it was a problem, "but when this happened everyone wanted to respond — they had to respond — because it became really real for them," she said. "I think a lot of that was because Islam was under attack."

Whatever the motivation, leaders in the community began setting up town hall meetings and discussion groups.

"There were trainings for imams, training for the community," said Suzanne Tomkins, who founded the Social Justice Clinic at University at Buffalo Law School. "They brought in national and other speakers to talk about this issue. And we're starting to see a great deal more collaboration."

Two years after the murder, she says imams are still holding local meetings, and asking for advice on how to spot domestic abuse and trying to figure out the best ways to report it.

Tompkins says it is part of Aasiya Hassan's legacy. "I don't see see that ending. I see it as a beginning," she said.

A Simple Grave

By tradition, many Muslims prefer to have their graves marked by just a note and a stick. At Lakeside Cemetery near Buffalo, Aasiya Hassan's grave, amid deep snow drifts, lacks even that simple marker.

A family spokesman said a headstone will be placed at the grave in the spring, after the thaw. By then, some two years after the murder, Mo Hassan likely will have been sentenced for the murder of his wife. He is scheduled to be sentenced March 9.