

# Sharifa Alkhateeb

1946-2004

## Writer, educator and community worker

Sharifa Alkhateeb, 58, who died on 21 October 2004, will be long remembered as an Islamic worker with many accomplishments to her credit, who served the Washington DC community as well as working for Muslim national and international causes.

As an educator, I knew her best for our shared work with the suburban Washington (Northern Virginia) Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS), with area Muslim schools, and in addressing issues of teaching about Islam and accommodating Muslim students' needs in American public (government) schools.

Sharifa Alkhateeb was also founder and president of the Muslim Educational Council (MEC), a nonprofit organisation educating staff and administrators at public school about Middle Eastern culture, Muslims, and Islam. She was a leader in arranging Arabic instruction in Washington DC area public schools and universities, including FCPS, and she worked hard to make sure school cafeterias clearly marked foods containing pork.

Between 1993-97, Sharifa Alkhateeb produced, wrote and hosted a monthly television programme for Virginia's public schools entitled 'Middle Eastern Parenting', and was a diversity trainer who taught several courses in Fairfax Academy, the FCPS teacher training institute.

She was never satisfied to see someone like myself, immersed in research and writing alone; she drew me out into community service on the FCPS Citizens' Advisory Committee, which helped lead to achievements at the state level. She encouraged and helped support my writing and curriculum work, as she supported the work of many others, seeking to give it broader exposure. She critiqued, edited, taught, organised and made connections among people who could further our common goals.

A very wide circle of friends and colleagues knew her for other aspects of her decades-long efforts in the cause of Islam. She earned an MA in Comparative Religion, co-authored the *Arab World Notebook* used in public school history classrooms nationwide, and worked on the Discover Islam poster series. She served as managing editor of *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*

(AJISS) until 1990.

Among the first two young women to join the Muslim Students Association of the US & Canada (MSA) soon after its founding in 1963, Sharifa Alkhateeb was an outspoken advocate of women's rights. She also founded the North American Council for Muslim Women (NACMW). As its founder and president, she served as advisor to the US Muslim Women's Delegation to the UN Conference on Women in 1995 and was also a member of the Board of Advisors for Karamah-Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights.

Over the years, she became increasingly concerned with the problems of domestic violence in the Muslim community. In 1993, NACMW became the first national Muslim organisation of any kind to discuss abuse and violence against women and children during a national convention. She counselled many families, and then saw the need for more systematic efforts towards building peaceful families. She founded and directed the Peaceful Families Project at the Faith Trust Institute – a nationwide survey of domestic violence within the Muslim community, funded by the US Department of Justice, VAWO Office.

Following the shock of 9/11 of 2001, she served as Middle East/Muslim Team Leader for Community Resilience Project, a post-9/11 crisis council and referral programme in Virginia funded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), and was a consultant for the Office for the Victims of Crime (USDOJ), the Maryland Crime Victims Resource Centre, and member of the Bi-National Advisory Committee of the Faith Trust Institute (formerly the CPSDV) in Seattle, Washington. Backing up activist work with writing and research, she was a member of the editorial board of the *Journal of Religion and Abuse*.

On Labour Day weekend, at the 2004 Islamic Society of North America (ISNA) convention, Sharifa Alkhateeb became the first woman to receive the Mahboob Khan Community Service Award, which recognises outstanding service to the Muslim community in North America. The award, instituted by ISNA is named in honour of late Muslim leader **Mahboob Khan**, a founding member of the MSA, ISNA, and North American

Islamic Trust.

Stricken with pancreatic cancer, Sharifa could not attend the function. Her husband, **Mejdi Alkhateeb**, accepted the award on her behalf, and her sister **Nafeesa Ahmad** read her inspiring and moving acceptance speech. She received a standing ovation from the attendees for the remarks which delineated the importance of women's leadership in the Muslim American community and how often their work goes unrecognised. The citation noted how Sharifa Alkhateeb has been a tireless worker for the Muslim community in North America and overseas during the past 40 years.

Sharifa was born in Philadelphia to a Yemeni father and a Czech mother. She is survived by her Iraqi-American husband **Mejdi**; three daughters **Layla**, **Maha** and **Nasreen** and; a brother; three sisters and a grandson.

■ Susan Douglass

Susan Douglass is the principal writer and researcher for the Council on Islamic Education, working on textbooks, curriculum and standards, teacher workshops and resources nationwide. She wrote this for the ISNA journal, *Islamic Horizons*, Jan-Feb 2005. (Slightly abridged for **Impact**).

## Dr Muhammad Abdul-Rau'f 1917-2004

Islamic author and academic

Professor Muhammad Abdul-Rau'f, 87, died on 11 December 2004 at a hospital in Bethesda, near Washington DC. Born in Egypt and educated at al-Azhar, Dr Abdul-Rau'f had a long academic career going back to 1955 when he helped set up Kolej Islam in Kelang, in the then Malaya. He later taught Islam at the University of Malaya; his students included the present prime minister **Abdullah Badawi**. He then went to the US as director of Islamic Centre, in New York, (1965-70) and subsequently headed the Islamic Centre in Washington (1970-80). In 1983, then prime minister **Dr Mahathir Mohamad** invited him to be the first rector (1983-84) of the International Islamic University of Malaysia. He was also awarded the Malaysian title, 'Tan Sri'.