



Martin Bentz

Interviewer:

So this is Emily Reinl. I'm here with Martin, who is one of our Common Ground storytellers. Martin, do you want to go ahead and introduce yourself, and start telling your story.

Martin Bentz:

Thank you very much, Emily. I'm Martin Bentz. Today is January 20th, 2023. I am the outreach coordinator for the Islamic Society of Southeastern Mass. That is a group of Muslims here in the New Bedford, Fairhaven, and Fall River area. We have a mosque where we worship, 2 Cove Road in south Dartmouth. We have a very fancy name because we want to be as inclusive as possible. So we're not saying that we're only this kind of mosque or that kind of mosque, but it's the Islamic Society for all of the south coast. We have about 200 families in this area at any given service on Fridays. We have about 80 people who come to worship on Fridays for what we call jummah, or our weekly prayer. That's today, it happens to be Friday, and it'll be at 1:00. It's usually always set at 1:00, regardless of what time of the year it is.

2015 is when we bought a house in Maple Street, and that is because I retired from the United Nations. But I had been coming to New Bedford for about 12, 20 years, because my sister, Helena Hartnett, also lived in New Bedford, and her husband was the editor of the Standard Times in the late 90s, early 2000s. Then we'd come and [inaudible 00:01:51] be able to come to a town where there was, in fact, a Muslim community, and there was a operating mosque.

So I worked for United Nations for 30 years, and of that, 15 years were at headquarters. Then the other 15 years were as an administrator for peacekeeping operations. I was assigned to places like Morocco, Eritrea, Democratic Republic of Congo, [inaudible 00:02:20], and in Kuwait, where I headed up the support office for activities in Afghanistan. As I said, we visited New Bedford every year on home leave to get away from some of the places like that.

While I was in Morocco, on one of my first assignments, in 1996, after years of actual spiritual searching and thinking about it, I accepted Islam ... Actually the story of that, just as an aside, is that when I was very young, when I was only eight years old, my father was assigned to Turkey, working for an oil company. And when I was that age I was very impressionable, and I heard what was called the adhan. The adhan is the call to prayer. I thought it was fascinating. I looked, I saw the muaddin, or the person who calls the prayer, climb the minarets, at that time there were no minaret, and used his voice to call people to prayer. I was very impressed with that.

That was in 1955, and I was certainly impressed with it ... '57. I forgot all about it when we returned to the United States. But when I went to Morocco in 1994, I heard the adhan again. I said, wow, that's something that I was so impressed with at that time. The local staff, who were Muslim, and in fact in time, I was talking to a young lady who was there, and she ended up a few years later actually accepting to be my wife. And she still is my wife, 25 years later. We got married in 1997. But I accepted Islam in 1996 after, as I [inaudible 00:04:20] to visit. Of course I was happy to see that there were Muslims.

There was a very small mosque, in '97 or so, which was in someone's garage. And that person since has passed on. But in the meantime, I wasn't here all this time, but there were other Muslims who came into the area, particularly from Serbia, and Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the Bosnian Muslims turned a butcher shop on 2 Cove Road into a mosque. I'm happy to walk you through that in a moment.

Having that mosque, and being able to come on each home leave to be able to pray, particularly the Friday prayer that I was just mentioning in the beginning ... It was an interesting mosque. There wasn't one in any other nearby.



I would say there was Boston, certainly, and in Sharon, and Worcester. But since my sister lived here, and this is where I wanted to live, my mother lived not too far away in Westwood, we said, "This is the best place." New Bedford is also known for its acceptance of diversity and inclusion, and it's what attracted us to the city. It was definitely, even in 2015, certainly we felt that it was very dynamic and very ... It was growing in activities.

The thing is, when I arrived here, the Muslim community was still very inward-looking. They were keeping a low profile. They thought that it wasn't their role to be too active in the community. And I felt the opposite, that not being shy about talking about Islam or any other topic for that matter. I thought that it was time to start representing what Islam and Muslims were here in this area, because there were quite a few Muslims. They were just very shy about actually talking.

So I started, very modestly, just by submitting a few articles to the standard times, where I would explain what is happening during Ramadan [inaudible 00:06:51] meaning festival. It comes from the same root as ides, the ides of March, as many people would know. Eid, ide. It's a common word throughout Roman times in the Middle East, and to say eid is a festival. That's exactly what we have. We have two eids in a year. One is at the the end of Ramadan, it's called eid al fitr, and then there's the eid that corresponds with the hajj a couple of months later.

[inaudible 00:07:20] what's going on with the Muslims, and we got a wonderful response. People said, "Finally we know why people are asking for this day off, and what's so important about the eid." Which is, they're the two holiest days in the Muslim calendar. In the Christian tradition, of course, we have Easter and Christmas.

Thanksgiving is a universal holiday. New Years is somewhat striking back to Christian. The eid was something that most people didn't realize was so important to Muslims, and so we actually brought that to the attention of the school board and to other people where people were working, that this is a day where Muslims actually get together at the mosque, regardless of what day of the week it is.

It doesn't have to be a Friday or a Sunday or whatever. Whatever day it happens to fall on, which is actually governed by the seasons of the moon, that their family on these two particular days of the year. Those days actually shift from year to year, so we can't say that it's always going to be on April 22nd, as it's going to be this day for the eid al fitr. Because Ramadan this year is starting from March 22nd to April 22nd, so that's one month, 30 days of fasting. And at the end of the month of fasting is a moment of joy and celebration, which is called the eid al fitr.

[inaudible 00:08:50] for instance, it'll be moved up 10 days, so it'll be on April 12th instead of April 22nd. And Ramadan will start on March 12th or 13th, depending on the sighting of the moon. But those days, as they fall in every year, should be a special day that is granted to the Muslim community. Many of the Muslims are a little bit shy about asking the day off. There are days in the year, two days in particular, that are important. There are other Muslim days of celebration, but not the same as these two holidays.

For instance, there is a celebration for the traditional birthday of the prophet Mohammed. But [inaudible 00:09:41] Christians are celebrating the birthday of Jesus, or Isa as we call him in Arabic, we have total respect for Isa and all that, but we don't want to divert attention from the worship of God, Allah in Arabic, to the worship of the person, which is the prophet, who brought the message from God to the people.

That's one of the subtle differences [inaudible 00:10:10] we respect all the prophets, starting with Abraham and Noah and Moses and David and Solomon and Ezekiel. St. John the Baptist even. And Jesus, of course. But not to be seen as incarnations of God, but specially selected messengers of God. We would call Mohammed, even, as the messenger of God. He had the Koran revealed to him through the angel Gabriel. That's in our tradition. So the text of the Koran is actually a transcription of what was dictated to the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him, from the angel Gabriel from God. So that's with those. But this is things that we wanted to start explaining to people.

I got more and more involved in the community and said, "Martin, you should let more people know about Islam." And I've been not shy about accepting invitations to talk to that. I also was able to, I was invited let's say, to write some articles on a bimonthly basis, that means every two months, for the Herald News, which is rotating among all the different faith leaders, Jewish and different Christian [inaudible 00:11:41] for that particular article.



And I just wrote a little bit more about Islam so that people would know what the five pillars are, or what we mean by various terms that people misinterpret within the Koran. So I wanted to explain these things. And they were very well received.

At the same time, I got more and more involved in community activities. Joined the Human Relations Commission in 2018, and just this year I was asked, or 2022, I was asked to be the chairman of the Human Relations Commission for New Bedford, which is in itself remarkable, that a Muslim would be asked to lead a Human Relations Commission. Only in that it had commissioned, for instance, people from the LGBTQ plus community, we have people from the Cape Verdean community, the Portuguese community, certainly the African American community. So we are a diverse group, and we have also someone from the Jewish faith, I'm happy to point out.

So we're Christian, Muslims, and Jewish, all together, respecting the concerns and needs of this diverse community [inaudible 00:13:11] asked to be the chairman of it. I wonder if I'm up to it for much longer. I just think it's a wonderful blessing, because the commission itself looks to any kind of complaint on human rights ... Abuses is maybe a strong word, but sometimes people, out of their ignorance, will mistreat another person, and it'll be hurtful to the person that they're [inaudible 00:13:40] particularly hostile to the LGBTQ community.

And we are trying also to provide more inclusion, more information, so that people understand that all human beings have a right to dignity and to respect, and to their life, and that there's no [inaudible 00:14:00] or hurt in who they are, by ethnicity and national origin, religion, color of their skin, their persuasion, whatever, all people should be treated with equal respect. This is a tenet, in fact, of Islam. That is one of the things, that in Islam, we respect all human beings. The person to judge, or who can judge another human being except God.

And most kind, but also very strict, we believe that we should be devoting our life to what Allah would expect of us. In other words, to be as good a human being as possible, to speak for justice, to always speak the truth, to be fair, to be fair and honest in our transactions and our promises, keep our promises, keep our [inaudible 00:15:00] why people think Islam was spread by the sword. Actually it was spread by people admiring that the Muslims who had come to Indonesia, for instance, or to Malaysia, or to Africa, were traders coming from the Arabian peninsula, were so honest, that they kept their word, they would always keep their transaction at a fair price. They said, "This is the kind of religion that we like. We don't want someone who's just trying to rob us [inaudible 00:15:31] people seeing the goodness within Islam.

These are things that I like to share, but this is what we try to do here now in town. For instance, the Human Rights Commission, or the ... Recently, by the way, just been changed to human rights. We have to wait for one more vote by the city council, but we've been called the Human Relations Commission since the 1970s. Soon to be voted upon by the city council, fully endorsed by the whole council and by the mayor, it's just a matter of procedure. But we also sponsor the Martin Luther King Jr. celebration every year, and this year it happened to be at a Catholic church. Before it's been at a synagogue, or at the United Church of Christ, or Grace Church Episcopal. That, again [inaudible 00:16:31] venue to another. And I would certainly welcome it at the mosque, only that I can't because it's too small. We have a very small mosque.

Just last Sunday we observed Martin Luther King's birthday on the 15th, which happened to be on a Sunday, and we were at Our Lady of the Assumption was wall to wall, standing room only attendance. And so as much as I would like to invite everyone to the mosque for the Martin Luther King Day observance, it's just maybe one third the size of Our Lady of Assumption, and so we wouldn't be able to fit the people that would like to come to that event.

Interviewer:

We're probably going to want to wrap up fairly soon. Is that a good way to transition into you telling me about these photos of the mosque you brought?

Martin Bentz:

Yeah, I'd love to. I just also wanted to say that one of the things that we're trying to do with the mosque, and I'm



going to walk you through the pictures, is that when I arrived here I said, let's have an open mosque day. Let's actually open the mosque to the public. So 2017 was our first open mosque day, and it actually was with about 12 different mosques at the same time, in April, in [inaudible 00:17:50] 13, and I said, "Yeah, that's a great idea." And we said the theme would be ask a Muslim.

So as I was saying before, people that don't really know much about Islam, and the articles were helpful, but many people had many questions, and we said, well invite people to come over and just ask a Muslim at the mosque, and show them the mosque. It's not so arcane and esoteric and hidden that you can't take a look what's there. So that's what we did, and we [inaudible 00:18:20] which was, again, to open up our dialogue with the community. Again, very well attended. Of course, also attended by city officials, state representatives. It was like that. So it was a very nice event.

Then last year, when Trump was President, we had one open mosque day again, early spring, called No Walls Between Us. So the idea that we really don't want to build walls, we wanted to [inaudible 00:18:51] then in 2020, we wanted to have one, One Nation Under God, which is basically our view. Unfortunately that was exactly when COVID hit, and so we've had to hold it up for three years. And now this year, 2023, we, God willing, intend to have open mosque day on May 21st. Again, with the same thing, one nation under God. So we hope to then invite people to come into the mosque.

And as they come to the mosque at two [inaudible 00:19:21] very small modest building that used to be just a butcher shop. And as they walk in, they'll see that there's cubby holes for shoes. Sort of like in kindergarten, every kid takes off their shoes and goes and puts their shoes away, same thing. But that's to respect the purity and cleanliness of the mosque. So when we go into the [inaudible 00:19:41] or barefoot for that matter, but mostly stocking feet. So that's what you would first see. Even at open mosque day we ask that people would share that experience of taking off their shoes and changing their attire and presence, how they feel of where they are, rather than just walking, marching in. But if someone has a handicap, of course we allow them to put booties on. We have little booties for them to put on.

Then one of the things you'll see early on entering the mosque is the ablutions, where before we pray, as Muslims, we don't require it of people who are visiting, but before we pray as Muslims, we actually wash our hands and our face and our feet, and then put our socks back on, before praying. Because it changes our whole demeanor. It freshens us up, we feel that we are ready for our prayer in the presence of God.

And you'll see as you walk in, also, that there is what looks like a set of stairs [inaudible 00:20:41] in a church, or in maybe a synagogue, the stairs are the other way around. You don't see the stairs. The person comes up to the front of the pulpit and gives a sermon. But in Islam the person stands up on top of a few steps and speaks out from the steps. And this is in the tradition of the prophet Mohammed, peace be upon him.

Next to that is an opening. Next to what's called the minbar is [inaudible 00:21:10]. So the qibla is aligned where the shortest distance to Mecca, which is the great circle. So Muslims, years before pilots started using the great circle to go from New York to, let's say, Paris, flying over Greenland and Iceland, you say, "That's not straight, that's not due east," no, but it's actually the closest way, the short distance, is going [inaudible 00:21:41] and in fact Muslims had figured out that in fact that's what the earth was like. It wasn't just due east or due west wherever you are in the world; you're praying towards Mecca, and towards what's called the Kaaba, which is, we, in our tradition, is the first temple, built by Adam, and then rebuilt by the prophet Abraham. So we're actually recognizing that the first temple for a [inaudible 00:22:10] at that time was just in the desert, by the prophet Abraham. So it's very closely linked to the Abrahamic tradition.

You'll see that there's a blue carpet straight out, and it's pretty common in all mosques that there'll be some kind of carpeting. But it's aligned in the direction of the qibla. So they don't necessarily have to be with little sections, it's just an idea to give people an idea where they should pray, but it's not to [inaudible 00:22:40] solid wall, and row by row, filled up. You don't see the prayer rugs. In fact, doesn't have to be a prayer rug, it's just out of comfort. The original ones were out of sand. The mosques were just, the prophet's, peace be upon him, his first mosque was just built with four walls around it, and a minaret. Or some kind of structure, it was quite like a



[inaudible 00:23:10] but the interior was all sand. And so it could be raked and cleaned and set up properly after each prayer. Now we use vacuum cleaners instead.

But you also see that we have various books, particularly the Koran. In Arabic, the original version, which has not changed [inaudible 00:23:31] we also have very good translations that are not archaic. We offer them gladly to anybody who wants to visit the mosque and is interested in Islam, and we also have a literature section that, people can take literature about Islam when they come to visit, and we hope they do. And we hope to continue the tradition of the open mosque day for years to come. I think [inaudible 00:24:00]

Interviewer:

Wonderful.