

I think there is a very beautiful dialogue between Muslims and non-Muslims in Pittsburgh. Regardless of what is going on in the Trump administration, people are reaching out and trying to help each other. Ironically, the election of the new president has brought people together.

After the election, groups of 50 to 100 non-Muslims would come to the mosque every week and ask, "How can I be a Muslim ally?" They wanted to find out for themselves what our religion is all about. We are living in a time where we barely talk to each other. You go to a restaurant and you see couples staring at their screens. But when we sit down together and talk together, we find out what the other one really believes and start to build community.

Islamophobia is real. Pittsburgh is not as culturally diverse as some other major cities. There have been threats made to Muslim teenage girls that they better rip off their head scarves. But the positive side far outweighs the negative. Nobody has ignorance copyrighted. There are ignorant people in every culture, every city.

I opened a youth center called Youth Alliance of Networking and Empowerment, or YA-NE, at the Islamic Center of Pittsburgh. I teach religion only for 10 minutes so it doesn't get boring. Most of the time, I try to help Muslim youth learn how to be Muslim in American society.

Muslim youth go through spiritual schizophrenia. Around their parents, they are Muslim. But when they go to school, they play it down. I try to give them honor by letting them know it is okay to be Muslim in America and not be embarrassed. Part of being American is being true to yourself.

— Interviewed by Cristina Rouvalis

FIND OUT WHAT OTHERS BELIEVE

> **Hamza Perez**

YOUTH DIRECTOR OF THE ISLAMIC CENTER OF PITTSBURGH