

## MUSLIM IN AMERICA

### Families maintain traditions in an adopted culture

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THE cell phone rings again.

Cardiologist Ahmed Sakkal stops eating and puts the phone to his ear.

The doctor doesn't do heart surgery, but he diagnoses patients before surgery and treats them afterward.

"How much? All right, let's do it," he says into the phone. "Get the ABGs. See what the saturation is. ... All right."

It's 6:45 p.m., and another doctor replaced Sakkal on call 45 minutes ago. Still, the nurses and residents call him at his dining room table, where guests have joined the doctor and his family for the evening meal that breaks the daily Ramadan fast.

An immigrant who came from his native Syria in his early 30s, Sakkal has realized a great deal of what is commonly called the American Dream. He and his family live in the Woodbridge subdivision, where their big house has an island workspace in the kitchen.

A large-screen television, a fax machine and a globe of the world occupy prominent places in what Sakkal calls the sitting room, which seems part-library, part-den. Volumes such as "Practical Angioplasty," "Cardiology" and the multivolume Encyclopaedia Britannica sit on the shelves, which also hold the Quran, a 10-volume commentary on the Quran by an ancient scholar, and a six-volume commentary by a modern scholar.

"My father used to have a big library," Sakkal said.

Their elder son goes to John Adams Junior High. Their daughter and younger son attend Mountaineer Montessori School. The family straddles two worlds, the modern and the traditional. They all speak English and Arabic, which is both the language of their homeland and the language that Muslims pray in. The children learn French in school. The children watch Saturday morning cartoons on English-language television and on Arabic-language television.

Sakkal and his wife say their prayers, as observant Muslims are supposed to, five times each day: at sunrise, noon, afternoon, sunset and evening.

His wife, Amal, an internist, knocks off for the day at 2 p.m. to pick up the children, come home, and run the household and prepare the evening meal. When she leaves her home — even in her own home if nonfamily male guests are present — she wears the hijab, the Islamic head covering, as she has done the last 12 years.

The guests this evening are Syrian, too: Dr. Riad Asbahi, a radiologist, and his wife, Huda, a West Virginia State College student. The Sakkals met the Asbahis in Logan, where the Asbahis lived and where Riad Asbahi worked for more than 20 years beginning in 1979.

The Sakkals lived two years in the early '90s in Logan, where Ahmed Sakkal practiced medicine, and where they were part of a Syrian community of about a dozen doctors and their families.

Sakkal adheres strictly to the 30-day fast, eating a light snack before daylight, going without food and water until sundown, when he snacks on a date, says his prayers and sits down to dinner.

Ramadan began in late October this year. Because the Muslims use an uncorrected lunar calendar, the holiday rotates through all 12 months over a 33-year cycle. (Jews use a lunar calendar too, but a corrected one, which means their holidays stay in the same season, but oscillate back and forth within a 30-day range.)

The fasts are tougher when Ramadan falls in summer; the days are longer and the heat makes people thirsty, Sakkal said. "As a physician, what we suffer from most in West Virginia is obesity. It's not malnutrition."

Sakkal knows that not all Muslim adults fast during Ramadan, but he isn't going to hazard a guess as to percentages. "Fasting is a question between you and God. You don't ask anyone if they are fasting, and they don't ask you."

The local Islamic community continues to grow, according to Imam Jamal Daoudi, the community's spiritual leader. About 2,000 Muslims live in Southern West Virginia, he estimated.

Muslims have opened mosques in Beckley, Princeton, Huntington and Morgantown since the state's first one opened in South Charleston 16 years ago. The South Charleston mosque is still the state's biggest, but now needs more classrooms and more space for children and social gatherings. Mosque leaders have been planning an expansion that would include a multipurpose room. But bids came in higher than expected, and leaders decided to raise more money before proceeding, Daoudi said.

Saturday-night Ramadan break-fast dinners draw 200 to 250 people to the Islamic Center, Daoudi said. Even more people will come for the dinner celebrating the first day after Ramadan, the feast of Eid, which falls on Tuesday.

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