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OPINION COLUMN

ISLAM VIEW

Pick a life path – stardom or infamy?

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This is the tale of two young athletes living in the same city and belonging to the same faith community. Both have made headlines recently. How they got into the headlines is what sets them apart.

In 2006, 16-year-old Nazem Kadri was attending A.B. Lucas secondary school in London. On the other side of town, Ali Medlej was close to graduating from South Collegiate. Both were Muslim teens of Arab descent. Kadri was a practising Muslim who served as president of his school's Muslim Students Association and was into hockey; Medlej was on his school's football team.

Kadri, now a 22-year-old star forward with the Toronto Maple Leafs, made headlines early this week after scoring his second career hat trick and subsequently being kissed by Don Cherry on national television. A few days later, Medlej was leading national newscasts for allegedly being part of a deadly terrorist attack on an Algerian refinery in mid-January. Medlej, 24, was killed along with high school friend Xristos Katsiroubas, 22, also a former South student.

Growing up in apparently similar circumstances, how did their stories take such opposite turns? The answer is anyone's guess. But their contrasting stories highlight the fact that youth today, more than ever before, are presented with a wide spectrum of choices. What needs to be done to help them make the correct choices is what stumps many parents.

The fear of "losing" our children is very real for most of us. Canadian youth continue to be negatively affected by guns, gangs, drugs and sexual exploitation.

Add violent radicalism to the list.

As we know, the attraction of youth — especially young males — toward violence is nothing new. Many get their fix through incredibly violent games such as Call of Duty and Medal of Honour. Some tragically take violence beyond their computer screens.

Practically every school shooting has been committed by a young person. Street gang criminals are often young adults and much of the gun violence that has shocked the country, such as the brazen shopping mall shootings in Toronto, has involved youth. Reports of youth going to commit acts of terrorism overseas are on the increase.

The fact that Islam may be used to justify such involvement must be of utmost concern to Canadian Muslim leaders, but the root of the problem is not specific to any particular faith or cultural group.

So what leads youth into such trouble? Isolation and alienation can push them to the fringes, where they start getting desperate for a sense of belonging, purpose and identity. Some are recruited to join street gangs or terrorist groups and are convinced to die for their "brothers" or for their cause.

Others like Dawson College shooter Kimveer Gill turned to the Goth subculture and Internet for a sense of community. Some turn to right-wing and left-wing extremist groups, while others, such as Medlej and Katsiroubas, have allegedly turned toward radical terrorist groups, perhaps to fulfil a desire for excitement and adventure.

In addition, these young people may feel they can actively participate in their group's world view and even correct perceived wrongs. Add dysfunctional homes, mental health issues, bullying and other factors and we have a potentially deadly mix.

As community leaders and parents, we have a responsibility to give our youth the attention they need in order to avoid bad choices.

This means going beyond the symptoms and tackling the root causes.

Many faith communities, including Canadian Muslims, recognize the need to reach out to our youth.

For this, we need resources to engage with our young people and educate them. They must be given opportunities to channel their energies constructively, in a way where their desires for acceptance, excitement, adventure, attention and making an impact can be fulfilled positively.

Most importantly, there must be open channels of communication.

The well-being of our children and youth is a shared concern. Let's come together and put our youth first. Their future — and ours — depends on it.

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