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NEWS LOCAL

Staying connected



By Tori Stafford, Kingston Whig-Standard
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Sikander Hashmi, 29, has been the Imam of the Kingston Islamic Cultural Centre since last summer.

When you think of a traditional Muslim religious leader, chances are you don't picture a man in his late 20s, toting an iPad, tweeting his daily events and uploading his weekly sermons to his website.

But this is the face of the Islamic community in Kingston - Imam Sikander Hashmi, a 29-year-old father of two who preaches one thing above all else when it comes to his position as leader of the Islamic Society of Kingston: accessibility.

"I mean, I expect anyone at my age to probably be doing all the things I'm doing with social media," Hashmi said of his connectivity.

"If I don't, people will think I'm from the dinosaur age or something."

He laughs heartily at the fact that he doesn't exactly fit the stereotypical mould of what one might expect of an Islamic leader. To Hashmi, being connected is just part of day to day life.

"I mean, I'm from the generation that used MSN Messenger," he said with a shrug.

Hashmi, who became the Imam at the Kingston Islamic Centre just over a year ago, said he's always been interested in new technology. After all, he got his bachelor in journalism at Concordia University, where he studied both broadcast and print journalism before working in the industry for a few years, writing for the Toronto Star and the Montreal Gazette, the latter of which is in his hometown.

But there are other reasons Hashmi chooses to use every possible form of social media to connect with others.

"I want people to know that I'm here and I'm available. I don't want to be stuck sitting behind my desk and only having people contact me on the telephone," he said.

"I think it goes for all faiths that if you want to reach out to people, you've got to do these things."

On a regular basis, Hashmi's profile picture on Facebook is a variation of the Apple logo, with the word 'iMam' underneath it. His account is public, so you can message him without adding him to your friends list. He said he recognizes that not all people would be comfortable with the idea of having Imam on their friends list on Facebook, because they may not want his feed on their walls, let alone theirs on his.

He also has a Twitter account, where he tweets to his followers when he posts his sermons to his website, sikander.ca, which he does on a weekly basis.

"It just makes it that much easier for people to contact me," he said, noting that the number of inquiries he gets about the Islamic faith has been on the rise for the last year.

"Not only that, but I think it gives the signal that, hey, I'm approachable."

Hashmi said that if people have questions or are confused about something, sometimes it's just easier for them to e-mail or message him. He even gets questions from students working on school projects, he said, which he is happy to respond to.

Of course, there is a reason he is an Imam, and that reason has nothing to do with Internet technology.

For nearly 10 years, Hashmi studied at Al-Rashid Islamic Institute, an Islamic seminary in Cornwall. He spent four years memorizing the entire Qur'an in Arabic, and did a six-year study of classical Islam.

For six years, he also ran eat-halal.com, an interactive site on halal food and where to find it. Halal, Hashmi explains, simply means permissible. Halal food, therefore, is that which is permissible for consumption by Muslims.

And this was all prior to his parlay into journalism, albeit short lived.

"My original thought was to be a journalist for 10 years or so and establish myself, and then just quit and work for some kind of community organization," he said.

"I hadn't thought of becoming an Imam. I never thought that I could fit into the public role."

But, working in marketing following his work as a reporter, Hashmi found he just wasn't satisfied. He'd always told himself he would go where he was needed, he said, and, after talking to a lot of his colleagues and friends about the idea of becoming an Imam, he decided to "take the leap."

Hashmi found the process of printing out his sermons annoying, not to mention wasteful of paper, so he got himself the iPad he reads his Friday sermons from each week.

"Not to mention, it helps with the image," he said, smiling.

"When children see me using the iPad, they want to know how it works, and they'll come and talk to me about why I use it."

As he said, he likes to be approachable.

Hashmi believes the reason so many more people have been inquiring about Islam is down to curiosity and the need to have an informed opinion.

"People are hearing a lot of things about Islam and about Muslims, whether it's in Canada or out in different parts of the world, and we're living in an educated society where people don't necessarily believe everything they hear," he said.

And when people are researching the faith, the trail often leads to an Imam - another reason he prides himself on being

accessible.

Hashmi said he understands that people must wonder what goes on inside a mosque and what he preaches in his sermons. This is why the Kingston Islamic Centre has an open-door policy.

"If anybody wants to come to a sermon on Friday and listen to what I'm talking about, by all means, you're more than welcome," he said.

"And if you don't want to come, then you can just go onto my website and listen to what I'm talking about."

For Hashmi, his role as Imam is simple. He has but one goal: to enhance people's relationships with God.

"I don't care if you're a man or a woman, young or old. I don't care if you're a Muslim or not," he said. "If I can help you get one inch closer to God, I've done my job."

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