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Modesty misrepresented

Exclusive Report
By Salam Zreika



attention. Did Yasamin Alttahir have a right to wear her mantoo to school?

While the answer to this question has been very conflicting over the recent month, the media has not been a great help in presenting all the facts. There are many issues attached to this story, however one outshines the rest- Why did Auburn Girls High School principal Sharon Ford have an abrupt change of mind about Yasamin's school uniform after she had been wearing it ongoing for two years?

Like many in the community I was shocked and disappointed to hear that a Muslim school girl rebelled against school policy to get her way. Or at least that was what the media highlighted- A troublesome Muslim trying to enforce 'stringent Islamic dress codes'. What's new? It was not until I spoke to Yasamin myself that I uncovered all the facts and frankly the facts speak for themselves.

17 Year old Iraqi-born Yasamin Alttahir has been attending Auburn Girls High School since the year 2001. At that time Yasamin approached her then school Principal Brian Ralph and asked if it was permissible for her to wear her mantoo to school. His reply was it was fine as long as it was the schools colour of bottle green and did not abuse health and safety. So

in early 2003 Yasamin decided to make the change. Growing up and maturing into life as a young woman she felt compelled by her personal level of faith to dress as modestly as feels right.

She said, "Modesty is vague. I personally believe my mantoo is modest. I am not questioning other students dress sense. I researched all the necessary facts and what I did was in compliance with the law".

So what does the law say about school uniforms in NSW? The NSW Department of Education have stated in their website regarding school uniform policy in Australia that, "flexibility must be used where implementation of the school uniform affects some students unequally. For example where an aspect of the school uniform offends an ethno-religious belief held by students or parents".

Auburn Girls High school has done more than enough to comply with the above statement. The current school uniform was developed in consultation with Muslim clerics within the community.

One Muslim cleric within the Shiite Muslim community, Sheik Jihad Ismail has a solid opinion on the issue, "I respect her decision to do what she has done, however the general understanding of Islamic dress code says the mantoo is part of it but not the only option and it should not be a dress

condition on other girls". The Sheik fully supports the current Islamic dress code worn by most Muslim girls at the school, which is a long skirt and long sleeved blouse or long pants with a school blazer both accompanied by the hijab.

"The girls dress perfectly in accordance with Islamic law" he said.

So why is Yasamin Alttahir still unhappy? With this understanding regarding the generality relating to the idea of modesty we are able to infer that this issue is strictly her idiosyncrasy rather than an issue of Islamic dress code or law. So for some media commentators to imply that this is an Islamic or Muslim issue is incorrect.

I asked Yasamin how she could dismiss the rulings of Islamic law on the requirements of dress for women. She said, I respect Sheik's interpretation of Islamic Law and I do not dispute it but with my limited knowledge of Islam I want to dress to my level of comfort in terms of my faith. I will be the one questioned by God on Judgment Day and I don't want to have to say 'but they said this and that' I want to know I am satisfied with my decision".

Yasamin continued to say that as long as the way she dressed in school was not offensive, did not interfere with her purpose at school to be educated and did not compromise health and safety then there is

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Connecting Communities: Transforming conflicts

Are you a violent person?

Please take time to reflect and answer the following questions:

Have you ever reacted angrily when something didnt go your way?

Have you ever slammed the door shut?

Have you ever honked your horn at an inconsiderate driver?

Have you ever raised your voice to your spouse or a colleague?

Have you ever used racist remarks or derogatory statements to another person?

Have you ever borrowed something and not returned it?

have you ever taken a long time to pay someone for a job they did?

This doesn't make you a violent person but it does highlight the different forms of violence in our lives. Violence is not just physical and direct harm against another person. Violence can be structural, indirect and mostly entrenched in

our culture, language and customs. In Australia there are many forms of violence. It exists in schools, detention centres and prisons and in our police and military services, it even exists in religious institutions.

So how can we learn how to deal with such violence? Are there techniques or skills that help us deal with violence? Well, yes, actually there is a unique program that is being offered to Australian Muslims and people of other faiths, exclusively for this year only. Connecting Communities is about building bridges between Muslims, Christians, Jews and Sikhs. These workshops are for community workers and ambassadors for peace who are active in the community and want to learn more about conflict resolution techniques and ways in managing conflict effectively.

This is a great initiative by FAIR and AVP Australia. The workshops are run monthly and involve 10-12 participants with 4

experienced facilitators. You need to be able to commit your weekend to get the maximum benefit. The program involves trust building, communication, consensus decision making, power transformation and role plays to deal with conflict. The workshops have been running for 10 years in Australia and are professionally and sensitively managed, catering for the personal and religious needs of the participant. We are calling Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sikhs to get involved in this important community building project.

Lunch is catered for and is both halal and vegetarian. There are only limited spots so hurry and register on line at www.fair.org.au/interfaith, all the dates and information is there on our website but if you have any queries just call Seyfi on 0412 318 045 or see our website: www.fair.org.au/interfaith.

The project is supported by Living in Harmony.

