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GIVING

A New Exhibit Hopes to Change Perceptions of Muslim-Led Nonprofits

The organization that spearheaded the exhibit asked Muslim Americans nationwide to share personal stories of daily giving. There were nearly 200 submissions.

By *Jie Jenny Zou*

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WF FUND

Sasa Aakil and Kae Pershon, art designers for Inspired Generosity, review the exhibit at the Auburn Avenue Research Library ahead of the opening in Atlanta.

By spotlighting everyday stories of generosity in the Muslim American community, the creators of a new exhibit hope to challenge harmful narratives Muslim Americans face and open the doors to new funding relationships for Muslim-led charities.

“[Inspired Generosity](#): Muslim American Stories in Philanthropy” debuted last month in Atlanta as a multimedia exhibit featuring videos, photos, poetry, digital art, and audio stories from the public about small acts of kindness.

“A lot of times we applaud stories about a million-dollar check, but it’s also the little things,” said Dilnaz Waraich, president of the [WF Fund](#), the lead partner for the exhibit, which includes more than a dozen organizations. “Inspired Generosity asks the average Muslim American to tell their everyday stories of philanthropy.”

Waraich hopes Inspiring Generosity will drive an “ecosystem change” within philanthropy and encourage greater inclusion of Muslim-led nonprofits, which she said have historically been underfunded compared with their interfaith peers. The WF Fund is based in Illinois and oversees philanthropic efforts for the Waraich family.

“Muslim American nonprofits don’t get to be in the room,” Waraich said of the missing link between Muslim-led nonprofits and institutional giving. “They need to prove they’re not terrorists, they’re not proselytizers, and they’re not just takers.” These are just some of the stereotypes Waraich said can arise in discussions with funders that she hopes the exhibit can change.

To create the exhibit, the WF Fund asked Muslim Americans nationwide to share their personal stories of daily giving. The group received nearly 200 submissions — more than 50 were selected by a national panel for inclusion in the showcase. About a quarter of the featured submissions are from Atlanta residents.

The stories range from that of Zane, a young child who helps his grandmother navigate her iPhone, to that of 11-year-old Zayan Kajani, the creator of [Lost and Found Heroes](#), an organization that partners with North California schools to donate lost items to homeless shelters and other community groups.

The showcase draws inspiration from [“The Soul of Philanthropy,”](#) an annual multimedia exhibit at the Chicago Cultural Center that highlights multigenerational stories of giving in the Black community. Waraich first stumbled across the exhibit in 2021 and began thinking about what a similar showcase exploring Muslim philanthropic practices would look like.

Inspired Generosity runs through October 26 at Auburn Avenue Research Library on African American Culture and History in Atlanta. Plans are underway to turn the exhibit into a tour with stops in major cities that are home to diverse, multicultural populations.

Stereotypes Can Negatively Impact Funding

Muhi Khwaja, co-founder of the [American Muslim Community Foundation](#), attended the exhibit's opening and said the event is part of ongoing efforts to redefine narratives about Muslim giving and open up new pathways to funding. The foundation, which has distributed more than \$20 million to 800-plus nonprofits, is one of the sponsors of Inspired Generosity.

“Muslim-led charities are supporting more than just the Muslim community,” said Khwaja, who noted the vast majority of Muslim-led charities are small organizations with limited staffs and budgets. “It’s hard for them to make the right connections with funders and get introduced.”

Islamophobic stereotypes are “definitely not helping the situation,” Khwaja said, noting they serve as a barrier for organizations looking to broaden their support base.

“We welcome mainstream philanthropy to get to know our organizations.”

We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.

DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION

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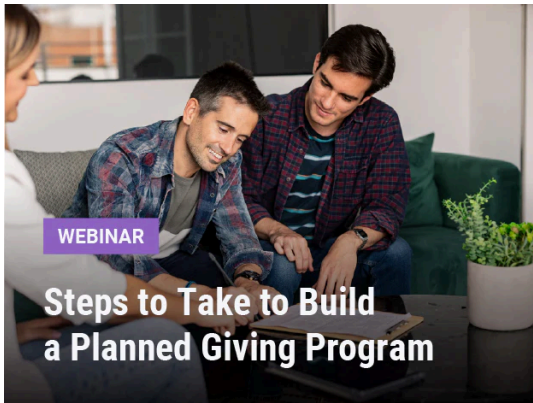
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