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'Meet a Muslim Family' hospitality challenges misconceptions

Casual home gatherings are a chance "to show Canadians that there are more similarities that unite us than differences that may divide us."

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Meral and Farhat Choudhry chat with Nina Bertolo and Marilyn lafrate, as the Choudhry family host non-Muslim guests in their home as part of the "Meet a Muslim Family" Campaign.

By: [Katrina Clarke](#) Staff Reporter, Published on Tue Mar 03 2015

The Choudhry family has an unconventional strategy for fighting Muslim youth radicalization — inviting strangers into their Woodbridge home.

On Sunday, the family invited 14 non-Muslim Canadians to join them for a casual late lunch. The gathering was part of a two-week campaign called "Meet a Muslim Family," in which Muslim families throughout Canada invited community members into their home for the purpose of uniting Canadian families and dispelling misconceptions about Muslims and Islam.

"There's one way to learn about Muslims — which is turn on CNN, and you'll see people on fire and buildings blowing up and bombs being dropped — or, you can actually see real Muslims in your neighbourhood who have been living here for decades," said Safwan Choudhry, one of the campaign's organizers.

Choudhry, 26, and two friends came up with the campaign after witnessing a spate of negative attention on, or negative treatment of, Muslims in the media. He pointed to a [Quebec judge's recent refusal to hear a woman's case](#) because she was wearing a hijab and to [terror charges laid against Canadians](#) with alleged ties to ISIS.

"I think any non-Muslim Canadian, hearing all this chatter, surely has to be concerned, if not worried, that like, 'What is going on?'" he said.

Choudhry said he hopes the initiative draws attention to similarities between non-Muslims and Muslims — he mentioned his family's interest in skiing and snowboarding and love for Tim Hortons coffee.

"For us, it was to show Canadians that there are more similarities that unite us than differences that may divide us," he said.

When asked for his thoughts on the reality that many non-Muslims don't doubt Muslims are similar to them, Choudhry said people still have questions and misconceptions about Islam still exist.

Online, social chatter about the campaign launch heated up Sunday.

Many Canadians posted supportive messages and photos on Twitter using the hashtag, [#MeetAMuslimFamily](#), but some questioned the necessity of the initiative.

"You mean meeting a regular freaking family?? WE SHOULDN'T HAVE TO PROVE ANYTHING," wrote one person on Twitter.

At the gathering, Choudhry's mother and sister chatted with their non-Muslim female visitors in one room, while his brother, father and friends spoke with men in another. The separation by genders is typical in large gatherings, said Choudhry's sister, Meral.

"It's about getting together, understanding each others' culture. Eliminating that fear of the unknown," said guest Deb Schulte, a former Vaughan regional councillor, who heard about the campaign from organizers.

Vaughan Councillor Marilyn Iafate, who came with her daughter and husband, recalled the prejudices she experienced growing up in North York as the daughter of Italian immigrants. She said she wanted to expose her own family to different cultures to fight similar prejudices.

"Whatever in your mind you think sets people apart ... the differences fall away because they're just in your mind," Iafate said.

To sign up for the campaign — run through the Ahmadiyya Muslim Jama'at Islamic organization — families request a meet-up with a local Muslim family through the [Meet a Muslim Family](#) website.

So far, hundreds of Muslim and non-Muslim families have signed up across Canada, said Choudhry.

The meet-ups don't have to focus on religion or international events, but Choudhry hopes the campaign draws attention to important issues, including Muslim youth radicalization and terrorism by Muslim extremist groups.

"Any terror group that exists today, they have one goal in mind: to cause fear and to create divides," he said. "If we just stand united... they fail, right at the root."