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Muslim institute to foster leadership

City-based group aims to go national

By: Carol Sanders

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Shahina Siddiqui (right) with program designer Martin Itzkow (left), board member Mohamed El Tassi.

First there was *Little Mosque on the Prairie*.

Now there's a Muslim leadership institute on the prairie, with plans to go national.

"We hope to develop and mentor future leaders from the Canadian Muslim community," said Winnipeg's Omar Siddiqui, the volunteer chairman of the board of the Canadian Muslim Leadership Institute.

The institute is holding its first weekend retreat in Winnipeg this weekend. The fledgling self-development program is expecting close to 20 18- to 40-year-old men and women -- both newcomers and established Canadians -- to take part in the first two-year session.

"With the many challenges (the) Muslim community is facing, to secure a pool of future leaders who can lead, sustain, steward and secure a place within the Canadian mosaic for the community through an integrated, collaborative, co-operative and compassionate leadership model, will only make Canada stronger and a model for the world," Siddiqui, 32, said by email.

The lawyer, who is married with two young children, said he's acting on his Canadian and faith values in trying to equip the next generation of community leaders.

He comes by it honestly. His mother is Shahina Siddiqui, a Manitoba Muslim community leader and executive director of the Islamic Social Services Association Inc. of Canada.

"My generation is getting old," said the elder Siddiqui. "We need young people to come forward. They need skills, they need mentoring. They need to learn from Muslim leaders and people outside the Muslim community," said Siddiqui, whose association is helping to get the institute up and running after establishing the Canadian Muslim Women's Institute in 2006.

"We need a new pool of competent leaders -- people who are professional in what they do -- they have expertise and a network and resource people they can turn to," she said.

Canadian Muslims have roots in about 50 countries but have much in common, she said.

"There's no dichotomy, to me, between being a Muslim and a Canadian," said Siddiqui. "These leaders are Canadians and they're Muslims. They can serve both," she said.

Will there be a Muslim prime minister one day?

"It is a hard question," said Siddiqui. "Right now the environment exists that it's very easy to be typecast," she said. "If one of them shows interest in politics, that's what they'll be mentored in... not because they're Muslim but they're worthy Canadians."

Siddiqui said leadership is about more than politics, management and finance.

"More and more it's about moving towards community leadership -- being an example, being a steward and an ambassador who grows as the community grows and has the capacity to meet the needs as they come up."

The plan is to develop leaders who are invested in the community at large, not just their own cultural community, and who are infused with Canadian and Muslim values, she said.

Social justice is one example of where those values mesh, said Siddiqui.

"It's a huge topic that will be discussed as well as gender equity," said Siddiqui, who noted there are opposing views on that subject.

"We're also looking at collaboration and co-operation between opposing views and how do you reconcile differences. Everyone has differing perspectives, yet we don't often talk about them," she said.

"Differences can be something that divide us or something that we can talk through." Good leadership and the tenets of Islam both encourage critical thinking -- not just following or going with

the flow, said Siddiqui.

"It's about putting our leaders to the test and asking what is your responsibility as a citizen? It's about developing self-analysis and awareness."

Many leadership programs exist but theirs will be unique.

"We're making it our own and we're making it Canadian," she said. "The focus is in Manitoba but we do have hubs in Toronto, Edmonton and the Prairies. Hopefully we will be making this national."

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