

For social change,
an organizer turns
his attention to art



As the director of arts and culture at the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, Asad Jafri believes art can be an effective tool in pursuing social justice. Photo by Joe Gallo.

Transforming culture

By Catherine Newhouse

Asad Jafri says he often hears, “I used to hate Muslims, just because I didn’t know them.”

That’s what some people tell Jafri after coming face to face with works created by artists of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, a nonprofit based in Marquette Park on Chicago’s Southwest Side.

As the director of arts and culture, Jafri coordinates the organization’s cultural activities that encourage its artists to speak out about everything from gang violence and food deserts to stereotypes related to race, religion and gender—all through visual art, theater, music and dance.

Jafri believes that, in pursuing social justice, art can be just as effective as the organization’s other activities, such as organizing and direct service—most notably a free health clinic serving the Chicago Lawn and West Englewood neighborhoods. This is especially true, he says, when it comes to transforming culture to create an atmosphere where social change can happen. “We found that music and art is the No. 1 way to change

For more info

To learn more about the Inner-City Muslim Action Network and its programs, go to www.imancentral.org.

the hearts and minds of people,” Jafri says.

Jafri has worked with the organization since 2003, when he started deejaying for the Community Café bimonthly spoken word night to promote a spirit of social

change in Chicago. The organization’s other arts and culture programs include artistic workshops, various art productions, and the biannual Takin’ It to the Streets festival, which attracted about 20,000 people in June. The largest Muslim-led festival in the U.S., Takin’ It to the Streets blends performances by popular Muslim hip-hop artists such as Mos Def with social justice-focused seminars.

When 29-year-old Jafri talks about art, his passion bleeds through. A Pakistani-American citizen born in Kuwait, he

found his identity through hip-hop, turntables and Islam as a Chicago teenager, and he understands why young Muslims struggle to define themselves in a world that's often biased against Muslims.

The Chicago Reporter sat down with Jafri to talk about the changing artistic and cultural landscape for young Muslims in Chicago.

What challenges do you see for young Muslims today?

Young Muslims basically have all these stereotypes against them, and they don't know how to express themselves. If you're from an immigrant family, you feel like your parents just don't understand. If you're from a family that's been brought up here, you'll see an older generation of Muslims—and the young people are just totally detached from it. We've had young people come here with Muslim names, and I've heard the other kids who aren't Muslim, ask them, 'Are you Muslim?' And he's like, 'Naw, heck naw, I'm not Muslim'—you know, really against it and not wanting to be that. It's the disdain that if you're labeled Muslim, that's the worst thing you can be. There's this misunderstanding, and young people having to be like, 'Man, what am I? How do I describe myself?' The biggest thing is just identity. How do you cope with having an identity that's not even defined, and then it's heavily stereotyped?

After Sept. 11, a lot of us found it easier to be Muslim. I feel like a lot of young Muslims found their voices because of that. I think that was a huge opportunity for people to be like, 'Something terrible has happened. I'm being blamed collectively. I need to say something now, because there's no more time for me to be a silent Muslim that just looks different and doesn't say why I don't eat certain things and why I pray at certain times and why I cover my hair. I could use this to create a positive out of a very negative situation.' I think a lot of people did use that opportunity.

How are those challenges different from previous generations'?

It's different than before when it was insular. Now young people are like, 'We don't want just our own Muslim community. We want to be very proud that we're Muslim, but we also want to be part of everyone else and open up that conversation and be civically engaged.'

I think that's what's happening now—a new era for Muslims to define who they are and take back their identity. In taking back their identity, it's interesting to find that there is no one identity for a Muslim. That's the beauty of it.

Why does your organization use art as a vehicle for social change?

We don't see it as negative, No. 1. No. 2, it's used as a tool for social change, because that happens across the world. If you watch the movie, 'Amandla' about the South African revolution against apartheid, it's showing how music and dance really empowered and mobilized folks to get together and overcome the apartheid that was happening there.

Art, in general, also has a negative aspect. Propaganda was used heavily in Nazi Germany. If we turn on popular radio stations right now, it will be a lot of negative messages, misogynistic or homophobic. I think, innately, it can be used as a tool—it's great aesthetically and pleasing to the ear. But it's really up to us how we use it, just like anything else. So I think the debate that music is bad, or as Muslims say, music is *haram*, to me is kind of

like a lot of wasted time. It's humans—it's us who take music for whatever we will.

Music is in nature all over, right? So from the birds singing to water to heartbeats. It's all rhythm and melody and harmony. And in Islam, if you read the Koran, it's poetry and it's rhythmic. If you hear the call to prayer, it's melodic and harmonious. It's just the essence of humans, as spiritual beings, to express themselves artistically, because it's all around us.

When you have a segregated city like Chicago, how far can art go in increasing cross-cultural understanding?

People have talked about using Detroit as an example for artists to come into a town that's bombed out and nothing's going on, and changing it so that it's a place where people want to come. That has to happen through artists. It can't happen through an urban planner who doesn't care about the people but cares how the city looks, or an architect who totally is into the architecture aspect of it but not into the people.

Artists don't come and say, 'I just want to bulldoze this building and put up a Starbucks and Bank of America.' They think about their environment and they reflect. It's important to do that because you can't live in a vacuum outside the things that influence all of us. So when you're a community organizer by day, you don't go home and sit in your community organizing zone not influenced by art and culture. You bring that to your community organizing world. I think it's important for us to synergize all of that.

What are the stories that have stuck with you over the years?

The No. 1 thing is: People who did not know Muslims and either were apprehensive against them or wary in general have embraced Islam themselves, or just love the community and are just as integrated as anyone else. A lot of college and high school students will come and first be very confused. But then they start saying things like *as-salamu alaykum* to people, because it just means, 'Peace be upon you,' and they're like, 'Oh, OK.' Young kids that aren't Muslim will start using those things—they'll call their brothers *ahki*, which means brother. It's cool for us to see because it's like, 'Well, you can go into another neighborhood and use language that's used there, like slang—why not do it with other Muslims?' You're appreciating the fact that you're among people who use certain things that are good things, like saying peace to them.

It's just amazing the power that it has when you're around people, as their perspectives change. The Chicago police were out at Takin' It to the Streets, chilling on their bikes, like, 'We don't have to do anything here.' They were just having a good time. At the end of an event, usually you'll have people being ushered out. There were a bunch of kids rapping. Usually when I'm in this situation, the police are looking at them, telling them to get out here, every time. I looked at them and said, 'Do we need to tell them to leave?' They were like, 'They'll be fine.' I felt like I was the one who had to tell them to leave. It was so peaceful that people didn't want to kick them out of the park.

Those kinds of experiences are important, because it totally blows away the stereotype that Muslims are extreme, terrorist-type of people. But also, it takes away the stereotype that people of color are unruly, and on the South Side of Chicago, you're going to have chaos and riots if you have thousands of people somewhere. It's like, 'No, that's not true,' and we can show that's not true. ■