

The Legacy of a Remarkable Muslim Woman: Sharifa Alkhateeb

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American Muslim intellectual, activist, journalist, writer, and friend to all Muslim women, Sharifa Alkhateeb, passed away Wednesday, October 21, 2004 AD/7 Ramadhan, 1425 AH.

Sharifa has been an advocate for Muslims and more specifically Muslim women nationally and internationally for the last 35 years. She was the creator, co-founder, and president of the North American Council of Muslim Women (NACMW).

As an active and effective grassroots organizer, she was a member of many national and international organizations. She worked tirelessly as an investigative reporter for the English Saudi Gazette, covering children's and women's issues, as a speaker and consultant to US federal and state government agencies regarding Islam and intercultural relations, and to further interfaith relations and dialogues. In 1998, she was the creator and director of the Peaceful Families Project --a nationwide survey of domestic violence--funded by the U.S. Department of Justice. She also trained Muslim leaders and Imams in issues of domestic violence within the Muslim community.

Sharifa was also an involved educator. She founded and presided over the Muslim Educational Council, a Mid-Atlantic non-profit organization educating public school staff and administrators about Middle Eastern Culture, Muslims, and Islam. She co-authored the Arab World Notebook used in public school history classrooms nationwide. From 1993-1997 Sharifa produced, wrote, and hosted a monthly television program for Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) called "Middle Eastern Parenting," and was a diversity trainer for FCPS for five years.

Sharifa was a caring friend, a wonderful wife and mother to her three daughters, and a continuous source of inspiration, energy and compassion. When I met her in 1968 during a Muslim Student Association conference, I knew that I had met a life-long friend, colleague, and sister. We started working together in the U.S., and later in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, on journalistic investigations and reports related to Muslim youth and women. Sharifa had a special exuberance about her, and was a constant source of new and creative ideas. She was simultaneously involved in many projects, but would always find time for her friends and family – I have many fond memories of joint family weekends on the shores of the Red Sea.

When she came back from Saudi Arabia in the 1980's, her first priority was her dream of establishing a national women's network. By the early 1990's, Sharifa felt that the time was ripe to call for a founding conference of NACMW, and, in 1992, the first national organization for American Muslim women was born. As president of NACMW, Sharifa put Muslim women on the national map of women's organizations. She worked tirelessly to establish the first consultative database of Muslim women's groups, activists, and scholars; she even started a crisis hotline for Muslim women in North America. It would take volumes for me to unravel her active history or to describe her selflessness and infectious positive energy, but I can certainly say that American Muslims have lost their First Lady.