



In the face of
stereotypes,
in the wake of
history,

Robany Nayan

*is teaching
a new generation about
courage
and building a life
beyond anything
you can
dream*

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In a bustling Madison coffee shop, it's easy to spot Rohany Nayan. Though her salmon-hued peasant top and blue jeans is the outfit de rigueur for busy west side working moms, her mega-watt smile gives her away instantly.

She grabs a seat and starts chatting, her band of bracelets jingling softly as she gestures—which she does frequently—during the conversation. Her voice is light and lilting, with just a slight hint of an accent. As she settles in with a bowl of soup and a cup of tea, she pauses and looks up. Her wide eyes are framed by a snow-white hijab.

She's been a bit busy lately, she admits. At the time of this interview, Nayan was preparing to defend her Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Wisconsin-Madison Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions (LISAR). It's an achievement she never once imagined for herself.

"I was the first in my family to complete high school, the only one to go to college, and the only one of my family to ever live overseas," she admits modestly, explaining how atypical her educational achievements are given her age, her upbringing, her gender and her geography. But it's not only her educational achievements that have put her on the map.

A quick skim through her 14-page curriculum vitae gives you a sense of where she's been and where she's going. Not only has she presented her current work in speeches and lectures at more than 65 locales—church basements and synagogues, classrooms and lecture halls—she's become a local advocate for tolerance and a champion of courage.

She's the "genius" (in the words of LISAR director Charles Cohen) behind a unique Madison-area interfaith program for high school teenagers simply titled the Courage Project.

It's a fitting project for Nayan, a woman whose life is an example of building bridges and creating trust from misunderstandings. There's no getting around the fact that at every turn in her adventurous life, Nayan has risen above stereotypes. In the face of personal challenges and the roadblocks laid by history, she's managed to fuse solid connections through something that more often produces friction worldwide: differing religious beliefs and backgrounds.

For Nayan, life is about continually defying expectations.

Nayan refers to herself as an "accidental immigrant." With a flash of her big smile, she explains.

Her tale begins humbly. Nayan was born in Kuala Lumpur, the capital city of Malaysia—a predominantly Muslim country in Southeast Asia. The youngest of seven children born to an illiterate

mother and a father whose highest level of education was elementary school, Nayan says, quite candidly, that she grew up "poor, on the wrong side of the tracks."

Gifted with a sharp mind and a passion for learning, she easily bested her parents and siblings in educational achievements, and was selected to attend a renowned school away from her family home as a teenager.

"I was not taught to have dreams," she says. "I was taught to always 'do my best.'"

Nayan's best soon led her to receive a prestigious scholarship from the government of Malaysia that allowed her to choose to study either in the U.K. or in the U.S. After being courted by representatives from universities in both countries, Nayan settled on one.

"I chose to enroll at Indiana University because I was mesmerized by the sight of snow in one of the slides shown about the university," she says.

She would be a world away from her homeland, but Nayan had every intention of returning.

"I had a contract to return and teach ESL [English as a Second Language] courses at my alma mater in Malaysia," she explains.

Nayan touched down in Chicago in 1985 and headed to IU's campus in Bloomington, Ind., to study language education.

"I arrived in January where it snowed heavily," she remembers. "I was surprised to see that the town was very quiet and there were not many people walking in the streets as compared to the capital of Malaysia that was always bustling with people."

As a young student far from home for the first time, Nayan found solace in a network of people she met in Indiana. While an American "host family" helped her adjust, spending time with other Malaysian students allowed her to speak her native language, enjoy Malaysian food, and practice traditional customs.

"This helped alleviate our nostalgia of home," she says.

But there was another aspect of Malaysian life she missed: her faith. Making a conscious departure from her family's more secular



way of practicing Islam, Nayan wanted to adopt traditional customs into her daily life, and chose a more observant interpretation of her religion. For this devout Muslim, it meant taking a big step.

“I started wearing the hijab, the traditional scarf that covers the head and neck, which is prescribed by the Muslim faith as appropriate attire for women,” she says.

It’s a decision that was (and is) decidedly personal for Nayan, but one that puts her in a unique position. She wears her religion—literally—where all can see. Though she never asked for the role, she has become a de facto ambassador for the Muslim faith.

Nayan is quick to point out that wearing the hijab is a choice, her choice, and one that she participates in but that her college-age daughter Bayaan does not. She laughs as she remembers telling her own mother she would start wearing a hijab.

“You won’t last even one day,” Nayan recalls her mother admonishing. “I took it as a challenge.”

Feeling more true to herself than ever, Nayan thrived, earning both her bachelor’s and master’s degrees. She also met and fell in love with Michael Thomas, a young Ph.D. student from New York studying at IU. It was then that her plan of returning to Malaysia changed, and her life started on a course that has taken her far.

With a laugh, Nayan describes her family today as “the United Nations.”

It’s a nod to her Caucasian/African-American/Native American husband (who converted to Islam prior to meeting Nayan) and their three children, each born in differing countries. It’s a happy collision of worlds that suits Nayan well, and has defined her personally and professionally.

Nayan and Thomas were married in 1989. Soon after, Nayan returned to Malaysia to fulfill her teaching contract. There, she gave birth to their son, Noah, in 1991. Daughter Bayaan followed in 1993, born in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, where Thomas and Nayan had accepted ESL teaching positions. The growing family then returned to IU’s Bloomington campus, where youngest daughter, Maryam, was born in 1999.

Together, the family came to Madison in 2005 after a stint in Norman, Okla., where Nayan’s husband was an assistant professor at the University of Oklahoma. Thomas had accepted a position at UW-Madison’s highly ranked Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

Madison was a great fit for the family, Nayan says thoughtfully, describing it as a “utopia” for its progressive and accepting nature.

“This is the smallest place I have lived, but in many ways the most open,” she says.

To Nayan, the city has been critical to her professional growth.

Though the family had moved for her husband’s work, Nayan was also being recruited for a position of her own.

She had been approached by the Madinah Academy of Madison, a private Islamic pre-K to third grade school, to serve as their principal. Founded in 2004, the school was fledgling. Yet, even with her qualified background, Nayan herself struggled to accept the position.

“To be a principal, you need connections, and I didn’t know a soul in Madison,” she explains.

Despite her initial misgivings, Nayan accepted the job, and soon began tackling all the challenges it presented.

Racism and hate are powerful catalysts for Nayan. She has no tolerance for them, instead opting to turn the negative energy in the world around her into sustenance that fuels her spirit and pushes her forward.

Her tipping point came years before she arrived in Madison. It was Sept. 11, 2001. Happily ensconced in Bloomington, Ind., at the time, she remembers how quickly her normal life was upended.



Her once-friendly neighbors were different.

“It was incredible,” she says softly. “Before, we were friends; they would eat my food, play with my children and smile and wave to me in the hallways and on the street. But after, it all changed. After Sept. 11, they couldn’t look me in the eye.”

They were scared, Nayan knows. So was she.

As the country reeled, fear took over. Yet Nayan didn’t shy from facing the new reality that had settled around her.

“I knew I had my work cut out for me,” she says.

In the days immediately following the terrorist attacks, many Muslim students on IU’s campus came to Nayan to share their stories of fear and bullying. Typical to her style, she gathered people to talk it out. Her goal? To begin a dialogue of understanding at this heady time.

An exercise in cross-cultural dialogue and education, Nayan received much praise for her ability to bring people together. This theme has been repeated many times throughout the past decade of her life, and ultimately led to a collaborative project built on one simple premise: Courage.

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“**Courage to me is taking that first step** into the unknown with the hope that good things will come out of it,” Nayan says. “Courage also means ensuring justice for other people and doing the right thing. It is crucial for us to agree to disagree agreeably.”

Nayan’s focus on justice—and doing the right thing—was born out of her own moment of courage.

In 2007, she chaperoned a field trip from the Madinah Academy to a small community outside of Madison. There, Nayan and her group of about 30 Muslim children and parents experienced the kind of treatment that often comes from ignorance and fear.

Before boarding a train for the trip, Nayan was summoned by the engineer on duty who bellowed at her, “I am a Christian. Are you going to kill me?”

Her cheeks flush at the memory of the blatant hatred, the emotions of that moment, and of calmly, quietly, with full knowledge that her students were watching her, sharing her story and dispelling this man’s myths and misunderstandings. The scariest part about the whole incident to Nayan? The fact that the engineer was a pastor at one of the local churches.

The emotions of that experience morphed for her into a deep resolve to plant the seeds for cultural awareness and tolerance across religions. To her, the path was clear. With her family’s support—and at her husband’s urging, in fact—she decided to go back to school to earn her doctorate.

Nayan found her place within the UW-Madison’s Lubar Institute for the Study of Abrahamic Religions (LISAR). Founded in 2005, LISAR’s mission stems from the close ties yet often bitter connections that have historically existed among Jews, Christians and Muslims. To Nayan, it was a place to utilize her life experiences and

educational background to encourage dialogue, cooperation and understanding between faiths.

The core of her studies, and what has become one of her hallmark contributions to the Madison community, focused on the institute's mission of bringing together members of these faith communities to learn about each other's traditions. To meet this mission, Nayan launched a new interfaith program in 2011 name the Courage Project.

Bringing together high school youth in grades 10-12, the project's curriculum allows students to share meals, host others at their places of worship, and discuss courage and challenges they face in religion, school and life.

"By breaking bread with someone, you learn so much more about them than in a classroom," she explains, pointing to hard data and research showing that when individuals sit and talk or share a meal together, hostility is lessened.

The far-reaching goal is lofty: To increase understanding of other faiths, learn about diverse perspectives, cultivate more peaceful relations and eventually develop stronger foundations to strengthen the bonds of a community, together.

While Nayan has also directed the successful Community Forum, an interfaith program for adults, the focus of the Courage Project is on youth for a reason, she says. Children don't have the accumulation of misinformation and prejudice that life heaps upon adults. It's a chance to build understanding and awareness early.

Yet in her first initiative prior to the Courage Project, a program between the students from the Madinah Academy and the Jewish Day School, she first had to convince the parents of both faiths that this was a worthwhile exercise.

Fear of how each religion would be discussed, and how this would affect their children, had the parents doubtful. Nayan used the questions as a chance to share her belief that interfaith dialogues aren't about changing beliefs, but about finding the common ground.

"The purpose of interfaith interaction isn't conversion," she explains. "It is about getting to know one another, sharing information, learning from each other, and working toward pooling this knowledge to become a stronger community as a whole. *That* is what it's all about."

For the students involved, it didn't take long for the idea to catch on.

"It was amazing," she says, describing how the elementary school children of seemingly disparate faiths began sharing stories, food, languages and games. As the day wound down, no one wanted it to end.

Neither did Nayan.

She took the idea, culled from a book she had read titled "Muslim Voices in Schools: A Narrative of Identity and Pluralism" to LISAR. Working within LISAR and with leaders at Temple Beth El, The Islamic Center of Madison and Westminster Presbyterian Church, the Courage Project was born.

The semester-long initiative began by recruiting participants from religious communities of the Abrahamic tradition in January. The program then culminates in final artistic presentations that include students' performances based on their own experiences with courage for participating families and the general public.

Comb through the Courage Project's newsletter, in which photos of the students' activities are coupled with their personal essays on courage, and you see the impact.

While the initial focus on building bridges and supporting religious tolerance was ever present, it's clear that for the students involved, the project has been about much more.

The teens write about both big steps in their lives—moving to new countries, traveling abroad, facing hatred or bigotry—and the

small events—simply asking a lonely student to join a lunch table. Their messages echo a similar idea: They never knew they had exhibited courage in their lives, until now.

"I have never pulled someone out of a burning building or leaped into a river to save a child, but I still believe I have courage," writes one student. "I face people everyday knowing I'm different and that we will never be the same."

The lessons they've taken away show how they've built a foundation for understanding others, themselves and the world around them.

"When I think of courage, I think of it as persevering outside your comfort zone," another writes. "And your comfort zone changes shape and size."

"I think that there is a reserve of courage, deep inside every one of us, waiting to be called upon when needed most," a student writes as a final message.

Nayan smiles wide. These messages sound so simple, but to her they are the building blocks for a generation more accepting, kind and tolerant than the last.

"We are all related—all a part of each other's world," she says. "It makes us better people when we learn to embrace each other rather than to isolate or pull away."

In the fall of 2010, through her work at LISAR, Nayan collaborated with Kjell Magne Bondevik, the former prime minister of Norway and founder of the Oslo Center for Peace and Human Rights. Nayan also worked with her team members at LISAR in organizing a panel for the theme "Jerusalem's Sacred Esplanade"—a space regarded as sacred for about three millennia of Jews, Christians and Muslims.

The next year, she attended a ceremony at the White House, as a representative of UW-Madison for the inauguration of President Barack Obama's White House Initiative for the President's Interfaith and Community Service Campus Challenge.

While she's remained steadfast in her work, rubbing elbows with presidents and prime ministers is not something Nayan ever expected.

"The last three years have just been unbelievable. I'm still pinching myself," she says. "Here I am, the seventh child of Zauyah, this illiterate orphan who never had a chance to attend school, and I'm doing all these things. I have met and worked closely with the twice-elected Kjell Magne Bondevik, the former Prime Minister of Norway on a peace initiative."

Her voice falters a bit, as if to take it all in herself.

But where her pride really bubbles over is when she talks about her 23-year marriage, her husband, her children—and the future that lays ahead for them all.

As she begins to pack her things to head back to work, Nayan's eyes sparkle at a question about how she manages to balance it all—the work, the family, the stress.

"My magic word is 'next,'" she says.

Fittingly, Nayan is embarking on what she refers to as her next chapter.

On July 16, she successfully defended her dissertation. Next, she'll start a teaching job at St. John's University in New York where she will be teaching courses related to literacy.

It's a bittersweet move, she says. Her relationships with the various faith and academic communities are something she will miss greatly, but the next adventure in her life awaits and she can't help but be eager to see what it brings. Her only hope is that the bonds that have been created personally and professionally can continue, no matter what happens in the world today.

"I truly have hope for peace in the world. I can never give up on that," she says firmly.

With a warm hug, she's off to what's next.

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