

PATERSON

Arab-American woman blazes path with police in Paterson

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Published 2:04 p.m. ET Jun. 15, 2017 | Updated 6:08 p.m. ET Jun. 18, 2017

PATERSON — Huda Shalabi cracked her first case at just 10 years old.

A marble cutting machine had been stolen from her family's backyard, and police, citing a lack of witnesses and video footage, could not help.

So Shalabi thought she'd try. She remembered where the machine was last seen and that her father had been cutting red marble slabs with it the day before.

When she returned to the spot, Shalabi noticed the machine had left behind a pink residue trail. She followed it through the backyard, through the driveway, up the street and, finally, to the perpetrator's house.

Officers who were called to the scene were shocked, Shalabi recalled.

“One of them told me, ‘You can be a detective, a cop, with a great mind like that,’” she said.

Now 20, Shalabi is well on her way.

The first Paterson cop to wear a hijab?

Last month, she wrapped up an internship with the Paterson Police Department, earned an associate's degree in criminal justice from Berkeley College in Woodland Park and began working at the Paterson Task Force for Community Action, a social services organization.

Shalabi's goals for the next few years are lofty: graduate from Berkeley College with a bachelor's degree in national security with a specialization in homeland security and become “the first Arab Muslim female officer who wears a hijab” in the Paterson Police Department.

“It would mean the world to me, like I achieved something, that I'm unique, that I stand out,” she said. “I could be a role model to other Arab females in my community.”

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South Paterson, where Shalabi grew up as the fourth of 11 children born to Palestinian immigrant parents, is home to one of the largest Arab-American populations in the country, numbering about 20,000.

Women in the neighborhood are expected either to become housewives or to choose careers that keep them largely indoors, Shalabi said. But her family never subscribed to such limitations.

“I want all my daughters to finish college and work with their degrees,” said her mother, Sana Shalabi. “Many people have said, ‘It’s very dangerous for her to choose this job; she’s a girl,’ but I told them she likes this job and I want her to study what she likes.”

Her oldest brother, Mohammed, said he tried to persuade Shalabi to choose a safer career path but could not break her resolve.

“I realized that what she wants is to help out the community,” he said.

A thin blue line

If she is sworn in to the Paterson police force, Shalabi would make history, according to Detective David D’Arco of the chief’s office.

“I’ve been here 19 years, and there’s never been a female that’s worn it, as far as I know, and there’s never been a female that’s asked to wear one,” he said referring to her hijab.

There are currently 18 Middle Eastern officers serving in Paterson — all of them men. About 13 percent of the 382-member department are women, according to the Police Department.

The department does not have a written policy on wearing a hijab, said D’Arco, but would likely treat it like any other religious exception.

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” he said.

In New York City, four or five women wear the hijab on duty, said Detective Ahmed Nasser, a department spokesman.

The department began allowing hijabs around 2007. The hijab must be easily removable in an emergency and must fit under the police cap to be allowed, Nasser said.

“Anybody who wants a religious accommodation when it comes to head covering, the NYPD is willing to work with them,” he said.

In Cliffside Park, 25-year-old Salua Kharoufeh has worn a hijab for the past four years while serving as a special police officer. The rank holds fewer powers than a police officer and is not permitted to carry a sidearm.

Kharoufeh said her experience has been empowering.

"The hijab is not oppression, it is a choice, and being able to hold on to my personal identity while still working in law enforcement is the most satisfying feeling," she said. "My hijab does not hold me back from anything. To me, it does the complete opposite and it represents my freedom of choice and freedom to follow anything I choose to follow."

Jim Sues, the executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, is not aware of any other Muslim police officers in the state who serve with a hijab but hopes those who continue to pave the way are not treated differently.

“It shouldn’t be a big deal,” he said. “I’m sure they’ll wear the rest of the uniform and the normal hat. The hijab should just be incidental.”

In Paterson, a female officer wearing one would be not only a powerful symbol for the Arab-American community but also an asset for the police, said Shalabi’s internship supervisor, Paterson Police Officer Irsi Velez.

“We have such a large Middle Eastern population that we only learn about through the guys at work,” Velez said. “Having her there would be amazing. It would just bring that female perspective to the different religious and cultural practices.”

Muslim officers can also be a bridge to a community that has been wary of law enforcement amid reports of secret surveillance. Those concerns peaked in 2011, when news reports revealed that the New York Police Department spied on Muslims where they ate, prayed and shopped in neighborhoods in Newark and Paterson.

The controversy prompted civil rights and community leaders to caution Muslims to talk to a lawyer before speaking with authorities and to watch out for police informants.

Law enforcement officials from across the state have worked to rebuild trust with the community through outreach, task forces and recruitment efforts to get Muslim youth interested in police and homeland security careers.

Shalabi said she remembers her family briefly discussing the surveillance but that it had little impact on her opinion of police.

"It didn't stop me wanting to become a police officer," she said.

Shalabi believes she will be most effective in domestic violence assaults involving Arab-American women, particularly those who speak only Arabic.

Too often, she said, they suffer in silence and stand by as their male partners proclaim innocence despite physical marks to the contrary.

"There's no way I would let that go," Shalabi said. "As a female officer, as an Arab officer, I would want to make sure everything would be OK."

The right stuff

Asserting that authority could prove challenging to a young woman, especially one in a hijab, said Velez, but she has full confidence in Shalabi to hold her own on the streets of Paterson.

"She cares, and that's extremely important," Velez said. "You have to care about people; you have to want to help people."

Gary Krulish, co-chairman of Justice Studies at Berkeley College and a former special agent with the U.S. Secret Service, said he can easily spot students who go on to careers in law enforcement by their demeanor and dedication.

"Law enforcement is a lifestyle," he said. "You have to be committed to your job 24/7 ... You have to make the most of internships and opportunities."

Shalabi's ambition sets her apart, Krulish said.

During the week, she expertly juggles family responsibilities with classes, work and nightly training in mixed martial arts and Brazilian jujitsu.

"Huda has kind of made her own opportunities," Krulish said. "I know Huda would not sit around at her work placement once she's done with her work. She will get up, go to her site

supervisor and say, ‘Is there anything else that I can do?’ ”

For Shalabi, the instinct to go above and beyond comes naturally.

“It’s just in me,” she said. “Ever since I was a little kid. All the support my parents gave me, my professors, my supervisor just made me who I am today.”

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