

## **“ILM Foundation- A Living Example of Social Reformation”**

While driving or walking down the streets of Los Angeles, one may notice figures of angels carved out of some type of marble design. These angelic statues stand about five feet tall and have wings attached to their backs are perhaps an allegory for what the essence of Los Angeles or “City of Angeles,” represents. However, a native Angelino may argue that the statues of angels are only a symbol for the real, unknown angels that watch over the shoulders of the people and serve the most indigent and destitute of human beings within Los Angeles. One such unsung angel in disguise is non other than the ILM Foundation, a public faith based non-profit institution that was founded to help people to “Eat right to Think Right,” and “Teaching life skills to replace social ills,” as ILM Foundation leaders call it. The ILM Foundation has been at the forefront of nurturing and advocating human dignity, social change and positive development by providing help to the helpless and most underprivileged of citizens living in Los Angeles, mainly Latinos who represent fifty nine percent of the population in South LA and African Americans representing nearly thirty six percent according to 2000 census records.

ILM has personified the idea of the Islamic tradition of implementing social change and enjoining the good by forbidding the evil within ones immediate society. When asked what ILM has to offer the city of Los Angeles and its people, Naim **Shah Jr**, Chief financial **officer** for ILM answered that ILM offers Los Angeles a faith based organization that serves all irregardless of race, gender, religion or status. “We promote tolerance and self respect for all,” said **Shah Jr**. . “This complements the diversity of Los Angeles and it is important that the character comes before color and righteousness before ones race. As a Muslim organization we represent America. This is a profound statement in light of all the negative press Muslim Americans are getting. Instead of reacting in a negative fashion, ILM serves as a motivation to help those in need in America.”

The ILM Foundation tackles many environmental factors that are necessary for a person to make sense out of life. If the necessity of food, clothing, health, and education is unassailable or quality denied, one's hope in the future is questionable. **The choices become influences under extreme conditions where consequences no matter how negative are justified to survive. The ILM Foundation was founded to prevent people from reaching such predicaments by first making them aware of where they can get help.** Hunger threatens 2.1 million people in Los Angeles alone. The youth within the South Los Angeles area **are** live under severe pressure from gangs and drugs and a lack of education. According to city statistics, African Americans represent 33.5 percent of the prison population. African Americans represent only 7 percent of the state's population. According to Denise Johnston, director of the Center for Children of Incarcerated Parents at Oaks College in Pasadena, an estimated 30 to 50 percent of male children of incarcerated parents will actually become incarcerated themselves. The number for female youth is nearly three to five percent. There are nearly 3000 students who drop out of school on a daily basis within Los Angeles.

## **HISTORY OF ILM FOUNDATION**

The ILM Foundation; "ILM" which is an Arabic word translated as Knowledge in English, was founded on the mean streets in the Heart of Los Angeles and has engulfed the community around it in a sea of change and hope. **The acronym ILM stands for Intellect, Love, and Mercy.** The ILM Foundation, founded by one Imam Saadiq Saafir, an African American who left East Chicago and arrived in Los Angeles in 1968. Imam Saafir has over 25 years of faith-based community services experience. He entered the ranks of the separatist Nation of Islam, however, he quickly became attracted to orthodox Islam in 1971. Imam Saafir had envisioned social change early on and was consumed by the burden of responsibility of changing the condition of African Americans throughout

America. “The type of lifestyle that we as African Americans were living, predicted no future for our people and especially the youth,” said Imam Saafir. Imam Saafir embarked upon a journey of social and moral change. For the next several years, Imam Saafir studied orthodox Islam under several notable scholars such as Imam Muzzamil Siddiqui and Sheikh Ahmad Sakr. Imam Saadiq Saafir, Executive Director of the ILM Foundation, says he envisions an Islamic organization and Islamic institutions that would stand as a banner for social justice in America for the under-represented minority. “We can’t say anything, but we can do something to change the image of Islam in America and Abroad.”

ILM was only the result of Imam Saafir’s vision and goal of reforming the society and the condition of the people that he knew so well. Imam Saafir, who was influenced by many social reformers including Malcolm X, says that his ultimate inspiration towards social change lay in the legacy of the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. Imam Saadiq mentioned that Prophet Muhammad, 1400 and some odd years ago had begun to implement the Islamic teachings of helping humanity by first starting with the most oppressed people in his immediate society. Prophet Muhammad began helping the lower class people who had nothing. He began a “social reformation” that sparked change within the individual which ultimately resulted with change in the surrounding society in Mecca. “The religion of Islam and Muhammad influenced me to change the condition of the underrepresented,” said Imam Saafir. Before his conversion, Imam Saafir said he was never into religion however as he began to learn about Islam, he made a conscious choice between either being consumed by the easy street way of drugs and gangs or becoming a Muslim (Believer). Imam Saafir is a living example of individual change; before a being a Muslim he was consumed with going to clubs and partying on a daily basis. “The type of lifestyle I was living had no future,” said Imam Saafir. After becoming

a Muslim, he tied himself to the community of Muslims and gained a passion for being a reformer of society and spreading the word of Islam. Thus in 1998, ILM foundation was established as a non-profit faith based 501c (3) institution within the Vermont district of Los Angeles.

### **VISION OF THE ILM FOUNDATION**

The vision of the ILM Foundation lay in the goal of institutionalizing ILM within the very fabric of American life, not only in Los Angeles, but throughout the underprivileged communities of the United States of America. The ILM Foundation has purely focused on building an institution through empowering the youth within the communities in which they work. Imam Saafir says that the youth are a vital part of making ILM a success 10 years from now. He said that through the youth, ILM and Muslim Americans can build bridges with the communities in America. The Muslim American youth according to Imam Saafir, are in a position that allows them to navigate the right moves and trends of the society because they are born and raised here in America and understand the culture more than the immigrant Muslims. Naim Shah Jr. Chief Financial Officer of the ILM Foundation is one such exemplary model of a youth who became a leader through the guidance of the ILM Foundation and the teachings of Islam through Imam Saafir. Shah Jr. a CPA and a father of four has been actively spearheading the efforts of ILM and has become a leader through and through.

Shah Jr. has received the Muslim Activist of the Year Community award from organizations such as The Council on American Islamic Relations, on his unselfish efforts of helping the under-represented community in Los Angeles. “There is a huge

need in our community to help those who are homeless, hungry and in need of basic medical screening. Homelessness and hunger are major issues affecting our community and can be like a disease that can affect anyone with no distinction between color, gender, religion, or social status,” said CAIR representative Sherrel Johnson. “The ILM Foundation is working to address these issues by conducting Feed the homeless and Health Fair events. They are also instrumental in bringing awareness to our communities and by building bridges with other organizations to combat these afflictions. ILM Foundation also works closely with the youth teaching them to set goals, and giving them the skills to go about reaching their goals. Since this type work is outside the scope of CAIR’s work, we strongly support and help publicize the need to continue the essential services that ILM Foundation provides to our communities to make our society a better place. It is unfortunate that their resources are limited, as they have the skills and discipline to work on a much larger scale.”

Imam Saafir ponders back on the days when he first met Shah Jr. when he met him in class at the ILM headquarters. “He is an outstanding individual and a tireless worker for Allah (The Creator). “We need to let our youth lead us because they Know America, and they are our future,” said Imam Saafir.

According to Shah Jr. The ILM focus is providing assistance to those in need. “Islam began this way as a social reform helping abused women, fighting for the right of children and slaves, and providing food for those who were hungry,” said Shah Jr. “This is the focus of the ILM Foundation, and we feel by helping others, Islam can be viewed as an asset rather than a threat.”

## **PROGRAMS**

ILM has **co-founded** programs such as “Humanitarian Day,” in which Muslim Americans feed nearly 3000 homeless people on a single day during the month of Ramadan. Other programs include, “Go Beyond the G.A.M.E.” an NFL football youth mentoring camp, Eat Right to Think Right Free Food Program and the Partnership for Human Interfaith Program.”

### Go Beyond the G.A.M.E.

ILM implements long term solutions through programs such as Go Beyond the G.A.M.E (Gratitude, Attitude, Motivation & Education), which is a mentoring program designed for minority youth living within the eight, nine, and tenth Los Angeles County Districts which are considered hard hit by poverty and crime. With G.A.M.E. now in its fifth year, ILM invites profession NFL (National Football League) players to come to LA and mentor young African American and Latino youths within a camp setting. NFL players such as Az Hakim of the Kansas City Chiefs and many other NFL professionals provide coaching and self-esteem building for the disenfranchised youth. “With an environment full of drugs and gangs, everything is against these youths,” said Imam Saafir. Imam Saafir also said that minorities that do end up going to college only go through a sports thing. “However education is best tool for survival of life,” said Imam Saafir. G.A.M.E. also provides career exploration, work shops on academic excellence, and gang intervention. G.A.M.E. encompasses the idea of gratitude for being human beings, providing a positive attitude that gives youth the motivation to move forward and finally the education as a sense of direction towards living a prosperous life according to ILM. For more information or to sponsor a child please visit [www.gobeyondthegame.org](http://www.gobeyondthegame.org)

### Humanitarian Day:

The Ummah Community Clinic works within the designated Service Planning Area 6 zone of Los Angeles where there are an estimated 85 percent of the patients are 100

percent below the poverty line and have experienced the lack of medical attention when seriously needed. Shah Jr. currently serves as a board member with the Ummah (Community Clinic). ILM has extended its work into areas such as humanitarian relief and development by coordinating efforts with Islamic Relief USA, a not for profit humanitarian relief organization that serves people in the most dire of needs around the world. Recently, Islamic Relief has partnered up with the ILM Foundation to implement relief and development domestically nationally through the event called Humanitarian Day . Humanitarain Day for the Homeless began in 2002, where every Ramadan Muslims from all over Southern California along with the Coalition to Preserve Human Dignity collaborate for a one-day homeless health fair. The fair takes place in the heart of Los Angeles on "Skid Row." Skid Row is most infamous for the homeless populations who have taken refuge within the abandoned make-shift shanty towns of downtown Los Angeles. A permit is received from the city to blocks off an entire street and sets up a mobile medical clinic mainly run by the Ummah Community Clinic. There is also food, clothing, toys, blankets, hygiene packs and a warm smile that is provided along with necessities needed to survive as a homeless person. This event has been covered by some mainstream media news papers in 2005 it was covered by ABC news.

#### Partnerships for Humanity:

Interfaith dialogue is an avenue that ILM has parked on to build bridges between the Jewish, Christian and many other faiths and beliefs that create the mosaic of America. ILM hosts seminars and holds classes on interfaith teach-ins through a program called The Partnership for Humanity Interfaith Program. ILM has partnered with Common Ground, which is a Jewish/Muslim study group, and the dialogue with Muslims and Catholics on the West Coast. This effort has helped to clear misconceptions between Islam, Judaism and Christianity. It has also brought down bearers of race, culture,

gender and religion. Imam Saafir has delivered two full speeches called The Paradox of Religion at the Neighborhood Church of Pasadena. Imam Saafir has also been interviewed by the USC Center for Religion and Civic Culture. "Our problem is that Americans see us and judge Islam through the Middle East paradigm," said Imam Saafir. Imam Saafir further said that it is important to look at grassroots organizations such as the Muslim Public Affairs Council, Council on American Islamic Relations, Islamic Relief USA and the Umma Community Clinic. Imam Saafir mentioned that Muslim Americans lack institutions such as hospitals and education centers which can serve the community irrespective of race or religion. "If our future in America keeps growing positively, America will see the need for Muslim organizations," said Imam Saafir.

The religious dialogue program has set new paths and has created new alliances, which most people in LA would consider quite colorful. There is a growing number of Latino converts to Islam within the last five to ten years in Los Angeles to Mexico, and reaching as far as South America. **The Latino-Muslim Movement was organized by about 30 Southern California Latino Converts who met regularly for nearly a year at the ILM foundation first site, in 1999 located on Vermont just south of Exposition. The group leaders were permitted to educate themselves without any interference from the ILM Foundation. The ILM main goal to insure that new Muslims has a pleasant and wholesome environment to learn Islam. The group still meets at other well know Islamic Institutions, such as Omar Ibn Al-Khattab Foundation.** According to statistics, there are an estimated 15,000 Spanish Muslims in America. From Exposition Park to the streets of Nicaragua, Spanish speaking Muslims stand as a beautiful silver lining around the entire Muslim community world wide. In New York, Puerto Rican Muslims have established an Islamic Center in East Harlem, where sermons are delivered in Arabic, English and Spanish. ILM now serves as a hub and a hang-out if you will, for all races, religions and

cultures. Imam Saafir mentioned that the ILM Foundation in its inception had first begun to help Latino Americans who were impoverished.

### **ILM COMMUNITY PARTNERS:**

The ILM Foundation has worked alongside many community organizations in order to build bridges of understanding and to show them that Muslim Americans really do care about people. “Common Ground-Muslim Jewish Dialogue,” a interfaith dialogue group formed a year after 911 it learn more about each others faith and collaborate on social project aimed at helping those in need , is one such organization that ILM has partnered with. Along with Stop the Violence-Increase the Peace Organization. The Ummah Community Clinic located in South Los Angeles is a medical clinic founded by UCLA Muslim American medical students a few years back. They have assisted the ILM Foundation by providing medical assistance to the homeless population that ILM helps to feed and clothe on a consistent basis.

“ILM foundation reaches the people that no one else does, and Imam Saadiq gives the guidance that ensures the continuation of this tradition,” said Clareen Menzies, Grant and Community Relations Director at Islamic Relief USA located in Burbank, California. “IRW and ILM Foundation are partners. IRW and ILM are broadening the scope of their long-term relationship by expanding the humanitarian day for the homeless program to other cities. “ILM Foundation personifies the best of non-profit,” said Clareen Menzies. Imam Saafir says that there is a lack of care for human life and that Islamically, Muslims should have a concern for every human life regardless of race or background.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Today, the ILM Foundation along with the rest of Los Angeles and America are reaping the benefits of the work of outreach and establishing social justice within the community.

“We envision an ILM family center where educational services are offered along with other necessities. Our goal is also to create ILM chapters nationwide within the next ten years. Our goal is to train young Muslims for positive leadership roles here in America.