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My Honors Experience as Authentic to My Life

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Abstract: As part of the *National Collegiate Honors Council's* (2022) collection of essays about the value of honors to its graduates (1967–2019), the author reflects on the personal and professional impacts of the honors experience.

Keywords: higher education—honors programs & colleges; Muslim American students; Northeastern Illinois University (IL)—Honors Program

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I watch the news and cannot help but think that the more things change, the more they stay the same: Some people can't pay their bills, some children can be cruel, tensions can become an exploding tinder box. There was a summer when the city of Chicago set up cooling centers to combat record-breaking summer heat. A child had pushed another child out of a Chicago Housing Authority high-rise over a candy dispute. Proposition 187 had pitted neighbor against neighbor in my home state of California, and a million black men heard the clarion call and marched to the capital.

Having Indian immigrant parents meant that Urdu words like *susral* (in-laws) and *jahez* (dowry) were a part of my family background, and moving to Chicago was the next natural progression in my life.

I had transferred into the elementary education department at NEIU partly because I wanted to understand American public education from all angles. The American Muslim community I was a part of had a love/hate relationship with the idea of public education while also almost deifying teachers. Joining the University Honors Program provided legitimacy to my need to explore my roots fully. I had already recognized parallels between American Puritans and the puritanical revivalism around my community. This was years

before 9/11; American Muslims were a blip, a curious aberration, if anything, in the larger mainstream society.

I proposed a Case Study of the Full-Time Islamic Schools in the Chicago-land area (there were only three at that time) to a professor in the education department, Craig Cunningham, who almost seemed to revel in telling students he was a Harvard law school dropout. He worked tirelessly to point me in the right direction when it came time to decide on an inquiry, methodology, and thesis. We met on a regular basis to determine how my University Honors thesis should proceed. He provided invaluable pointers and actually read my drafts.

Being part of the UHP gave me the green light to transform my fairly standard university education into something that was authentic to my life. It allowed me to engage in writing and research that was beyond the scope of my classes. I delivered my first-born soon after I graduated from UHP and NEIU. I am grateful that this is a part of my history.

Today I work for the Youth Academy at College of DuPage among other things.