

THE HERNDON OBSERVER



Yusuf Albarzinji

Sixth Grader Preaches Peace

BY SABRINA EMAYATULLA
OBSERVER STAFF WRITER

Keeping peace in Herndon has sometimes been a bit of a battle, with issues like the day labor site, the meals tax and the disconnect in the town during the last election.

But just around the corner from historic downtown, where it seems as though all the big decisions are made, tucked away on Jackson Street there is an effort being made to examine what peace means, not only in the community but throughout the world.

Last week, 12-year-old Yusuf Albarzinji, a sixth-grader at Al-Fatih Academy in Herndon, learned that he won third place in the 2006 Peace Essay Writing Contest sponsored by the Richmond Peace Education Center.

Albarzinji said his teacher had the class fill out the contest forms but also made the essay a class assignment.

When Albarzinji found out he won third place out of more

than 200 entries, he said he was very surprised.

"I didn't think I was going to win," he said, sitting at a picnic table after school still in uniform from the day. "I brainstormed a little, but when I started writing I just knew what I wanted to say."

In his opening paragraph, Albarzinji writes, "Skyscrapers standing tall without planes being flown into them. If only people could live without abusing each other. If only humans would stop making excuses to harm each other."

"I was talking about terrorism," he said confidently. "There just shouldn't be any terrorism in the world."

Albarzinji, an American Muslim, said he remembers attending public school in Sterling, a place where he would sometimes hear students make fun of each other or see older students get into fights.

He said he feels more peaceful at the school he is at now, adding that there are consequences for students who don't use the conflict resolution skills they are taught at the school.

Academy Director Afeefa Syeed said the diverse population at the school has forced the teachers to meet each student's needs in different ways. Syeed said the 5-year-old school has made it its mission to integrate civic awareness as well as textbook curriculum.

"We have kids in here whose families live in Iraq and other kids whose parents are in the United States military," she said. "We want to focus on how to blend our identity as being Muslims, but not forgetting that we are also Americans."

Syeed said, like herself, many of the teachers were raised in the United States, making their children second generation Americans.

Following the Fairfax County curriculum, learning about war from a historical standpoint comes standard, but at Al-Fatih, Syeed said the administration wants to add a humanistic approach as well so students can see how war affects people.

On a recent field trip to Washington,

D.C. students learned about the men and women who died in battle. After their tour, they got a chance to speak with a Korean-War veteran who spoke first hand about his experience.

Although he is not a teenager yet, Albarzinji already understands the importance of family values. In his essay he talks about starting small in order to achieve world peace.

"If a person doesn't agree with us, we have to ask him/her why they think that way, and accept what they think," he wrote. "If families spend more time together, for example going out to eat, or going to the movies, or even just talking with each other then they would become closer to one another."

Albarzinji said he wants to be a musician when he grows up, and he plans to write songs with peaceful melodies to promote peace all over the world. He adds that writing is his favorite subject and he may enter another contest in the future.

For now, Albarzinji is just like any other 12-year-old boy who likes to skateboard, play video games and would like to someday find the answer to world peace.

Osman Aijazi, another sixth-grade student at Al-Fatih Academy, received an honorable mention for his essay.