

## HOW TO TRAIN MUSLIM STUDENTS TO INTERACT WITH THE MEDIA

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### ABSTRACT

Under the current circumstances, it is imperative that we present Islam and the Muslim American community to the American public in the most truthful and accurate way. With that end in view, we at the Noor-Ul-Iman School, in conjunction with the Islamic Society of Central Jersey (ISCJ) have formed a Media and Public Affairs Committee (MPAC). The committee includes several teachers and students from the Noor-Ul-Iman School. Over the last few months, we have had enormous success in interacting with the local media. Our students have had several letters published in the newspapers, our Hijab-wearing basketball team has been featured in the local newspapers and New York television stations, and our County Champion Noor-Ul-Iman School Mock Trial Team is now the toast of the county.

In this seminar, “How to train Muslim students to interact with the media,” the speaker will discuss how they formed a media committee and how to train students to be media savvy. The media committee’s role in influencing the local township zoning board to approve the construction of a two-story school building for Noor-Ul-Iman School, the expansion of the mosque and parking lot, and the construction of an office building will be discussed.

### FULL PAPER

At this most critical juncture in the history of Muslim Americans, it is vital that we present the best and the true face of Islam and the Muslims to the American people. To accomplish that goal, we need to tap into the talents that exist within our own community.

Members of our community who can help, must possess the following qualifications: a) they must be able to speak grammatically correct English, preferably with an American accent; b) Americans must be able to fully comprehend their English; c) they must be well versed in current world affairs, especially as it pertains to Muslim American interests; and d) they must be American media-savvy.

While there are a few first generation Muslims who possess the above qualifications, the focus has to be on our American-born children. It is the responsibility of the media-savvy adults to train them. The Islamic Society of Central Jersey (ISCJ) and the Noor-Ul-Iman School, which is housed on its premises, have formed such a Media and Public Affairs committee (MPAC). Several Noor-Ul-Iman teachers and students are members of the media committee.

The MPAC is authorized to deal with all the media and outreach programs on behalf of ISCJ and the Noor-UI-Iman school, such as: a) visits from and to television stations; b) visits from and to radio stations; c) visits from and to newspapers and the print media; d) visits by our school personnel to other schools and religious institutions; e) visits to our school by outside schools and religious institutions; and f) collaborative efforts such as Interfaith Meetings. Members of MPAC have to undergo training in each of the above, attend meetings and prepare themselves thoroughly before representing ISCJ and the School at any internal or external forum.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE MEDIA COMMITTEE

As the Muslim Americans become more high-profile and the media becomes increasingly more interested in learning about Islam, the Muslim American community, and the community's response to events worldwide, it is essential that a system of standards and procedures be established to make sure that Muslims and Islam are presented in the most favorable and truthful light to the American public.

Public Affairs Committee is the official clearinghouse for information disseminated from our Society and the School and will establish and enforce standard operating procedures for different types of interactions with the American media and the public. This committee will be founded and operated on established public relations procedures.

## MEMBERSHIP

Due to the sensitive nature of work this committee will be expected to perform, the current committee will evaluate new applications for membership very carefully. Applicants must exhibit either prior experience in successful public relations and information management or show an innate potential for learning these tasks. All new applicants must undergo an interview process with the committee and a background check. The committee will also identify and invite members of the community who they believe will strengthen the committee.

## COMMITTEE TASK FORCES

Members will be assigned to a task force by the media coordinator based on their personal strengths as assessed from the interview and any supporting writing samples submitted for evaluation. Members can belong to more than one task force.

- Electronic (television) Media Public Relations – Will engage the electronic media in live or prerecorded video encounters such as interviews. This is the highest risk setting with potential for combative, even unfair questioning. Participants must be fluent in English, speak with an American accent, be media savvy and pass rigorous internal training and testing.

- Radio Media Public Relations – Will engage the media through on-air radio or telephone settings. High risk setting with potential for combative, even unfair questioning. Must be fluent in English, speak with an American accent, be media savvy and pass rigorous internal training and testing.
- Print Media Public Relations – Will engage the print media over the phone, through writing of articles (opinion pieces), letters, press releases, and emails. Must be able to converse in and write excellent English, be well-versed in world events and media savvy, and undergo rigorous internal training and testing. Documents released to the print media on behalf of IS CJ must be approved by this task force.
- Outreach Public Relations – Will engage ordinary Americans through visits to, and hosting of school students, religious institutions, public forums and Inter-faith meetings. Must be excellent public speakers with excellent command of the English language and be public relations-savvy.
- Facility Hosts – Will engage the media and the public through guided tours of the facility. Low risk setting. Must speak excellent English, be knowledgeable about, and able to explain the fundamentals of Islam to non-Muslims, and be a person of a pleasant demeanor.

## TRAINING OF MEMBERS

All new and current members will begin mandatory training of approved talking points and techniques for presentation. Talking points will be initially established by the committee but will adapt to current events and will be reviewed periodically for embellishment. All members will participate in mock debates to gain familiarity with talking points as rebuttals, techniques for presentation, and current trends in anti-Islamic commentaries and propaganda. Members will be challenged on a level appropriate to their experience and task force.

## TALKING POINTS/VOCABULARY

All members will contribute to the continual development of talking points/vocabulary and must adhere strictly to them as they function within their task forces. A committee launch meeting will be held to establish an initial range of points/vocabulary relevant to current events. A vocabulary list will be presented for use to the IS CJ Board of Trustees and key members of the community who come in regular contact with the public.

## MEDIA AND PUBLIC KITS

Multiple IS CJ Kits will be created and stored in a location easily accessible to the administrators. These kits will address different issues the public may find useful when

they visit the facility. Each kit will include literature that presents the information in an easily digestible format. Component topics will be augmented or removed as necessary.

- Proposed Media Kit on: Islam, Terrorism, Palestine, Iraq, Kashmir, Chechnya and Women in Islam
- Proposed Public Kit on: Islam, Terrorism, Islam in America, and Women in Islam

All media kits will include a CD with images and text documents for quick and easy inclusion into articles. Funding will be required for the Media and Public Kits.

#### STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES (SOPs)

The committee will establish SOPs defining the process that non-committee members will follow in the event of media requests for visits; media surprise visits, public tours, requests for representatives, and general protocols, when no committee is available. A list of all committee members within each task force and their contact information, key Board of Trustee individuals, and key members of the community who have expertise on particular subjects will be made available to the office administrators.

#### HOW THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS COMMITTEE SUCCEEDED IN ACHIEVING THE FOLLOWING, WILL BE DISCUSSED (THERE WILL BE SOME SHOW-AND-TELL)

- 1) On September 11, 2005, the Media Committee took out a full page ad in *The Times of New Jersey* condemning terrorism.
- 2) Two days later, in its lead editorial, *The Times of New Jersey* praised the ad. This was unprecedented.
- 3) On the first day of Ramadan last year, IS CJ Media and Public Affairs Committee took out a quarter-page advertisement in the op-ed page of *The Times of New Jersey*, welcoming the Americans to “worship with us,” and explaining what Ramadan is all about.
- 4) The Media Committee developed good rapport with the local newspaper, the *Home News Tribune*. On the day of Eid-ul-Adha, on January 10, 2006, for the first time ever, an American newspaper, *Home News Tribune*, greeted Americans with a banner headline, “HAPPY EID” on its front page.
- 5) The IS CJ Media and Public Affairs Committee worked very hard behind the scene with the Executive Editors and reporters of both *Home News Tribune* (IS CJ’s only local daily newspaper) and *South Brunswick Post* (IS CJ’s only local weekly newspaper) and convinced them to endorse IS CJ’s expansion plan.

- 6) In its lead editorial on Friday, February 26, the *Home News Tribune* urged the South Brunswick Township Zoning Board to vote “yes” to ISCJ’s application for expansion.
- 7) On Thursday, March 2, the day of the Zoning Board’s vote on ISCJ’s application, in its lead editorial, the *South Brunswick Post* endorsed the ISCJ’s expansion plan.
- 8) ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee made sure that the students of Noor-Ul-Iman School wrote letters of thanks to the *Home News Tribune*, the *South Brunswick Post* and the *Star Ledger* every time the newspapers featured Noor-Ul-Iman School prominently.
- 9) ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee arranged for the head of the local Boy Scouts of America (Noor-Ul-Iman School has New Jersey’s only Muslim Boy Scout Troop) and the organizers of Elijah’s Promise Soup Kitchen for the homeless in New Brunswick (where Noor-Ul-Iman School students prepare and serve food to the homeless every year) to send letters urging the South Brunswick Mayor and the Zoning Board members to support ISCJ’s expansion project.
- 10) ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee selected and coached the speakers and Noor-Ul-Iman students who pleaded for the ISCJ expansion project approval at the end of the South Brunswick Township Zoning Board hearing on February 16.
- 11) The above public relations activities by ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee contributed significantly towards the approval of ISCJ’s and NUI’s expansion project by the South Brunswick Zoning Board on March 2.
- 12) To show appreciation for the *Home News Tribune* and the *South Brunswick Post*, subsequently the Media Committee organized three subscription drives for the two papers after three Ju’ma prayers.
- 13) Through the efforts of ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee, the *Home News Tribune* has offered internships to one current and one former Noor-Ul-Iman School student this summer. The *Home News Tribune* has also offered part-time employment to two current Noor-Ul-Iman students and one former Noor-Ul-Iman student in their “Teen Scene” section.
- 14) The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee members wrote and helped Noor-Ul-Iman students write op-ed articles/letters about the Danish cartoon controversy. The letters/op-ed articles were published in *The Times of New Jersey*, the *Star Ledger* and the *Home News Tribune*.
- 15) The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee facilitated the coverage of the Noor-Ul-Iman School’s girl’s basket ball team on the front page of the *Star Ledger*, the sports page of *Home News Tribune* and on New York’s television station, Channel 11.

- 16) ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee arranged for a reporter of the *South Brunswick Post* to interview the members of the Noor-Ul-Iman school's Middlesex County Mock Trial Champion Team. This resulted in a front-page article in the *South Brunswick Post* with a photograph of the winning team.
- 17) The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee handled the visit by Bridges TV to ISCJ.
- 18) The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee hosted two private schools which visited ISCJ recently: the Pingry School and the Pennington School.
- 19) The Lawrenceville School is planning on visiting ISCJ on a Friday in April and would like to invite Noor-Ul-Iman students to visit The Lawrenceville School on a Thursday in April.
- 20) When a non-Muslim reader criticized Sharia laws in a letter published in *The Times of New Jersey*, a member of the Media Committee and a Noor-Ul-Iman student had letters published correcting the first writer.
- 21) When boxing legend Muhammad Ali was attacked in the same paper, a Noor-Ul-Iman student responded with an excellent letter.
- 22) When former Education Secretary William Bennett said that one way to reduce crime was to abort black babies, a member of The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee published a letter criticizing him in *The Times of New Jersey*.
- 23) When a *Star Ledger* columnist criticized the holy Qur'an, a member of the ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee published a letter that corrected him. A Noor-Ul-Iman student published a letter that defended the Palestinians against an unfair attack in the same newspaper.

Here is what the ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee hopes to accomplish next year, Inshallah:

- 1) The ISCJ Media and Public Affairs Committee would like to start an Internet radio broadcast from the ISCJ.

In the few months that the media committee has existed, by Allah's grace, it has been enormously successful in promoting ISCJ's and NUI's interests. The committee has made a significant difference in the way ISCJ is perceived by the outside community. The community is beginning to view ISCJ positively. Currently, the members of the ISCJ Media and Public Affairs are overwhelmed with work.