

# PEOPLE OF ACTION

## Janan Najeeb

President & CEO, Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition  
Executive Director, Islamic Resource Center  
Member since 2017

When Janan (Atta) Najeeb's parents moved to the United States from Jerusalem in the mid-1960s, they became one of only a few other Muslim families living in Milwaukee. While many immigrants feel compelled to quickly assimilate and blend in, the Attas believed it was important to preserve and celebrate their culture—and instill that pride in their children.



"Most immigrants feel a certain pressure to check their customs and religion at the door," said Janan, who was 3 years old when her Palestinian family came to Milwaukee.

"There were many times that we were the only ones celebrating particular holidays and certain religious practices because it was a very small community back when I was growing up, but we always felt proud. My parents instilled a tremendous sense of pride in us and it has carried through to this day."

The strong sense of self and open-mindedness that blossomed during her childhood likely led Janan to her life's calling. The University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee graduate, who excelled in math and science from a young age, enjoyed a career as a microbiologist for a number of years, but always felt pulled to be a community builder.



"Although I loved the field I was in, I recalled how much I always loved sharing my culture with fellow students and I realized I didn't have much opportunity to do that anymore."

When Janan and the other members of a Muslim women's fellowship group saw a need to bridge the gap between the negative perception of Islam and Muslims and the actual beliefs and practices of the vast majority of the world's Muslims, they started a speakers bureau that visited area clubs, organizations and schools to discuss culture, religious practices, the Middle East, interfaith and Muslim women.

"I had flexibility at the time so I was the main person to go out and do the speaking and I just loved it. I felt that I had truly found my calling, and the rest, as they say, is history."

Janan is a founding member and current president of the women-led Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition (MMWC) and director of the Islamic Resource Center on Milwaukee's south side. MMWC, whose goal is to use faith-based values to ensure dignity and equity for all, has a cultural center, lending library, youth programs, the *Wisconsin Muslim Journal*, Milwaukee Muslim Film Festival, training and outreach and a domestic violence program for Muslim women with interpreters in Arabic, Urdu, Malay, Burmese, Rohingya, Hindi, Somali and other languages.



It's clear that Janan's work is her passion.

"I'm energized by coming up with new, innovative ways to bring people together, to build community, improve people's lives, and safeguard our youth and help them find a brighter future. These are the things I live and breathe, and I jump out of bed every day ready to tackle challenges and come up with new ideas to incorporate into what we do."

It's difficult to believe Janan has time and energy for much else, but a lengthy list of positions, board memberships, affiliations and "a million different things" ranges from the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts and Wisconsin Public Radio, to the Committee for Interfaith Understanding, and the Milwaukee Commission on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault, as well political activism, presentations, writing articles and being a frequent media guest/spokesperson.

And although it took some gentle prodding from Executive Director Mary McCormick, Janan finally added Rotary to that list.

"I knew it was a great organization but I'm so busy and I didn't want to join just to join. After a while, I got embarrassed to keep saying, 'yes, soon,' so I finally joined and I'm so glad I did. It's such a good group of people and the programs and speakers are wonderful because there is always something to learn."

A mother of five grown children, Janan, who lives in Mequon with her husband Waleed, a physician, is grateful to Rotary for coming together to support the Afghan evacuees at Fort McCoy, Wisconsin.

"I'm so thankful to Rotary members who jumped in to raise thousands of dollars to purchase items, those who went shopping, filled up their cars and hauled donations to us. It truly showed the best of humanity."

Like Rotary's support of the Afghan people, Janan said great things happen when people come together for the common good with open minds and hearts.

"I really encourage people to get to know others, to embrace the rich diversity and cultures we have in Milwaukee. Go to the ethnic stores and restaurants and chat with the owners to understand where the food is coming from and try to gain an understanding of the culture. Making those connections has enriched my life beyond belief."

*NOTE: The Muslim Women's Coalition welcomes continued donations of money, new clothing and supplies and furniture for Afghans being resettled in Milwaukee and beyond. Please contact the Rotary office if you would like to donate.*