

Another Day in the Life . . .

Nancy Fredericks

His father walks through the automatic doors of the library talking loudly in Arabic on a cell phone. Albert (Al) turns away hoping his father won't notice him; he doesn't want to be associated with this man speaking Arabic. Albert's real name is Abdul. He prefers to be called Al; he is embarrassed that he is Arab American. He felt like he was different before September 11, 2001, but now the teasing seems constant. Al has confided to me on several occasions that the teasing really gets to him. One time as Al and I were talking a group of teenagers approached Al and handed him a picture of a "camel crossing" sign they had printed from the Internet. It is a yellow diamond-shaped sign and has picture of a camel with the words "camel xing." The teens were laughing hysterically; Al was obviously embarrassed and tried to ignore them. Afterwards he shook his head and said, "They think that's funny." I didn't understand the joke, but Al did and explained that they were ridiculing his ethnicity.

Other teenagers draw pictures of Arabic teens with box cutters in their hands and show them to Al. They also joke around about playing Dungeons and Dragons with Al and that he would pick a card with a man wielding a box cutter. I don't even think there is such a card. At times, Al seems very depressed. Depression is common among teens, but at times Al becomes unusually quiet and withdrawn. When he's feeling good he socializes with his friends at the library, but on occasion he won't come in for several days or when he does his head hangs down or he covers his face with his hair or a hat.

Al's treatment by his friends is not unique. Many teenagers display seemingly contradictory characteristics of being both sensitive and mean. I believe that Al finds the library a safe place even though he is subjected to some teasing

there. When the other kids get to him, he goes over to one of the librarians and chats for a while. The other teens keep their teasing to a minimum when library staff is around. Libraries offer a place for teens to socialize while still being somewhat protected by adults. For this reason, it is vital that libraries as part of the community provide a place for teens to safely explore their world. Often adults don't understand the problems of being both a teenager and an immigrant. Libraries can and have developed programs to help immigrant teens and their families adjust to life in America while teaching tolerance. The MetLife Foundation *Reading America* Program provided a grant to thirty libraries nationwide to provide book and film discussion groups for teens and adults in order to foster communication among generations, especially in new immigrant families. The Young Adult Library Services Association sponsored a program at the ALA Conference in 2003 entitled "Living in the Salad Bowl: Serving Immigrant Teens." Deborah Ellis, author of *Breadwinner*, a book for young people about a boy in Afghanistan, spoke of teaching kids about the universality of the human experience. J. Wallace, coordinator of the Newcomer Youth Centre at CultureLink, a United Way agency in Toronto, spoke about the unique role libraries play for immigrant teens. These types of associations provide funding and inspiration to librarians who wish to develop programs that teach tolerance.

Music is another useful tool for teaching teens empathy and tolerance. Al, like other teens, listens to music for stress relief. He listens to many of the same bands that other teens listen to. He'll be attending the Next Big Thing this month, a concert of collective bands. Like most American teens, rap is part of his musical diet. Some believe that commercial rap music is crude and promotes intolerance, but there are some

lesser-known rappers spreading positive messages. A Palestinian American rapper, Iron Sheik, uses his skills to bring attention to the plight of Arab American teens through his rap songs and Web site. Through his music he encourages teens to learn more about Arab culture and politics. One link on Iron Sheik's Web site is *Beats for Peace*, "a youth driven collaborative movement of resistance that uses arts, active education and community organizing to work for social and economic justice." They sponsor events throughout the United States that encourage tolerance and compassion.

Providing access to music and the Internet allows teenagers opportunities to learn about their world and other cultures. Organizations like the American Library Association, MetLife, and Libraries for the Future sponsor conferences and grants that encourage librarians to provide programs for teens and to learn more about serving teens including immigrant teenagers. The following poem, "Trenches and Moats and Mounds of Dirt," is from *19 Varieties of Gazelle-Poems of the Middle East* by Naomi Shihab Nye and captures some of the emotions of many Arab Americans:

An ancient world thick as fleece
and layered grapes,
stones stacked into walls on
hillsides,
the neat lineage of orchards. . .
even now in shuttered rooms
silver needles pulling thread till
a bird rises from the cloth
to fly in circles
over a scene she does not
recognize.

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Where is her nesting place,
the safe slot between the
branches?

There is a language
Between two languages
called Mean but who will admit
they are speaking it?

“Let’s change places,” the teen-
agers said.
“For a week, I’ll be you and you
be me”

Knowing if they did, they could
never fight again.

Listen to them. ●

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