

DIFFERENT LIKE YOU

Meet teens whose unique experiences might make them seem as if they're from another world—when in reality they're just like you.

Naomi, 17, covers her head to honor her Muslim faith. She's also teaching other teens to understand religious differences.

By NAOMI MUSTAFIZ, as told to JANE BIANCHI
Photographs by DENISE CREW



I don't wear a hijab around the house or to bed, but I'll put one on if a friend comes over.

"I WEAR A

I'll never forget the day I realized that people sometimes make fun of things that they don't understand.

It was two years ago, during the fall of my sophomore year of high school, and two close friends I'd known since kindergarten were sitting near me, giggling and cracking what they thought were hilarious jokes. Out of nowhere, I overheard one of them call me a terrible name: a terrorist. My jaw dropped. I was in shock, because I never expected them, of all people, to say something so offensive.

I'm not sure where the courage came from, but I thought: *If anyone is going to stand up for me, it's going to be me.* I said to them, calmly but firmly, "How could you say that? Especially after you've known me all these years? That's not true or funny." All of a sudden, their smiles faded. Their faces became serious. They looked uncomfortable, like they wanted to change the subject—but they were so embarrassed that they couldn't even respond.

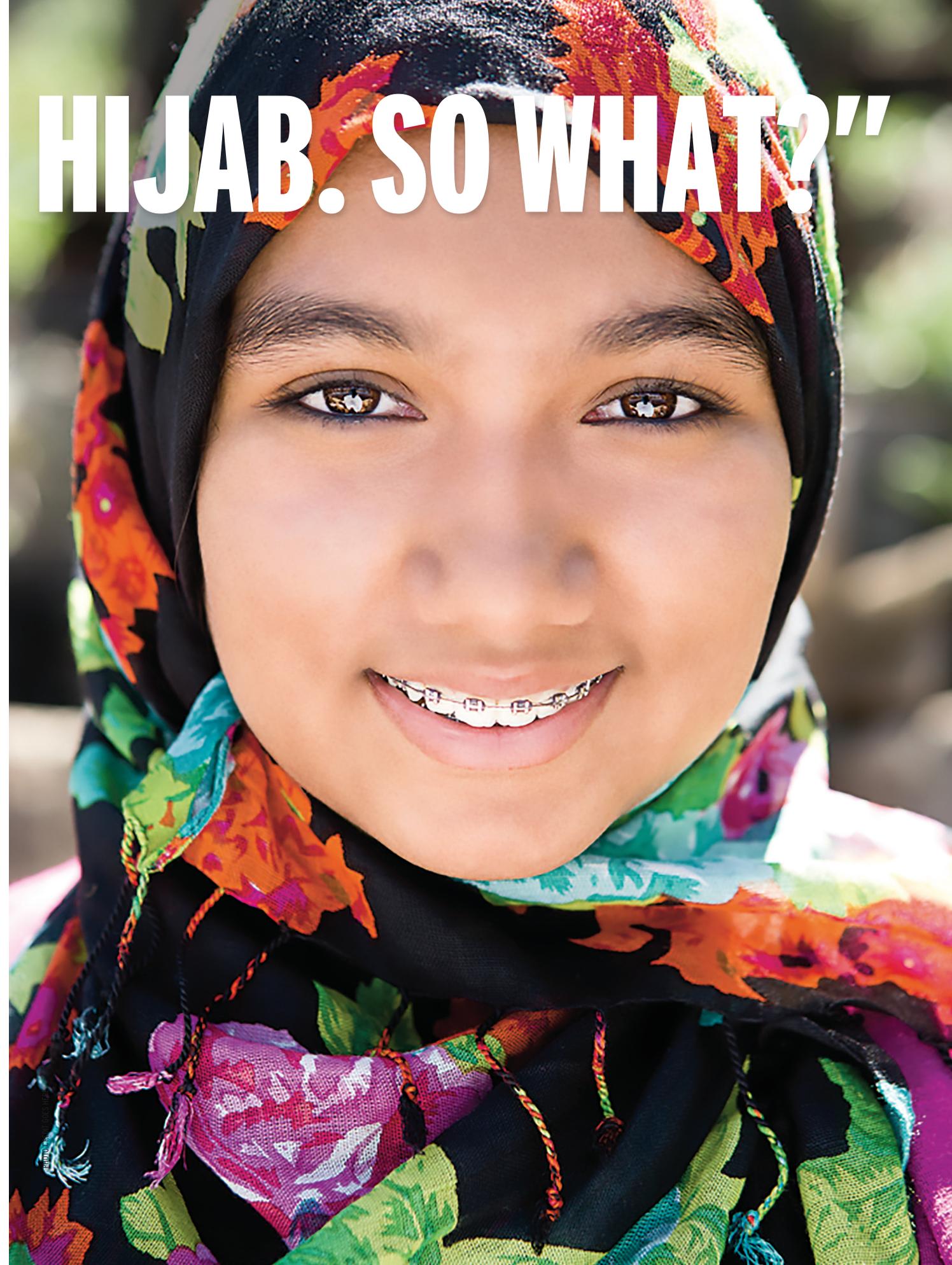
We've never really discussed it since, but in my heart, I think I know why these friends made this mean comment.

I had started wearing a hijab.

CHOOSING TO STAND OUT

You may be wondering what a hijab is—it's a scarf that some Muslim women use to cover their heads and necks, and any Muslim girl can choose to wear one once puberty hits. When it was time to take my annual school ID photo heading into my sophomore year, I decided I was ready: I wanted to begin

HIJAB. SO WHAT?"



PHOTOS BY DENISE CREW (ALL IMAGES)

wearing a hijab to feel closer to my religion, Islam. (That also meant dressing a little differently. When you wear a hijab, you can show only your face, hands, and feet.)

My religion has been a part of my life for as long as I can remember. I pray daily and go to a mosque (my place of worship) at least twice a week to study the Koran—it's like the Bible for my religion, and its stories have taught me valuable lessons, like how to stay humble. I also love the sense of community that I feel at the mosque. It's like we're one big family, and that's comforting.

Having that support system to lean on is especially helpful whenever someone makes an insulting comment about people of my religion—which, unfortunately, happens too often. Why would you assume someone is a terrorist just because of one head scarf, one beard, one name? You can't. I wish people understood that a very small group of Islamic extremists, like ISIS, does not stand for the greater Muslim community. In fact, violence violates the central principles of Islam—and I condemn those who try to justify acts of terror.

TEACHING TOLERANCE

To help combat hurtful stereotypes, my brother created a Muslim Student Association (MSA) at my school in the fall of 2013. The next year, I became president. The organization aims to teach the public more about Islam. You don't



I've been bowling since I was 11! My average is 145, and I've made a lot of great friends through my league.

have to be Muslim to join—in fact, most members at my school aren't!

One really cool event that we started last year was called "Hijab Day." We put up posters, brought in 50 scarves, and gave female students the opportunity to wear a hijab for the day. I wasn't sure how many students would participate, but so many girls came by that we ran out of scarves! Hopefully, they all learned that wearing a hijab doesn't make me any different. (And those friends I mentioned in the beginning? They've come around too.)

I feel like there's a myth that if you're religious, you can't have fun. But it's important to find a balance in life. I have tons of hobbies! I love playing the piano, cooking recipes that I find on Pinterest (like

mini tacos!), taking road trips to national parks, and riding all the roller coasters at Six Flags. Some people think that a hijab limits what a girl can do, but honestly, it doesn't. It's just a scarf! ■

3 THINGS NAOMI WANTS YOU TO KNOW

1

Speak up.

If someone makes an insensitive remark about your culture, religion, or race, you don't have to stand for it. Say politely, "I wish you wouldn't say that. That offends me."

2

Be kind.

Just because a person doesn't look like you or dress like you doesn't mean they're any different on the inside. Don't judge people—get to know them.

3

Start an MSA.

Whether you're Muslim or not, you have the power to start a Muslim Student Association at your school to promote religious tolerance. Visit MSANational.org.

NAOMI'S FAVORITE THINGS ★★★★★



► **MUSIC:** My favorite singer is Adele—I just love her songs. She has such an amazing voice. I'm also into Coldplay, Lana Del Rey, and Demi Lovato.



► **BOOKS:** Reading is a big hobby of mine. I have a thing for series, like Harry Potter, and I think I'm going to start Percy Jackson next. My friends keep telling me to read the Hunger Games books too!



► **SUBJECT:** Science. I want to study biochemistry and become a doctor someday!

► **PET:** I'm allergic to both cats and dogs but had a fighting fish, aka Betta fish, that died recently. I definitely plan to get another one! They have such beautiful fins.



► **TV SHOW:** The Office is amazing, and I also like Once Upon a Time—it's like all the Disney tales put into one show. My other favorites are Marvel's Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. and Psych!



► **MOVIES:** I love Into the Woods, the first Avengers movie, and Pitch Perfect.