

Servants of the people

Meet the officials of the World Community of Islam in the West

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(Continued from page 13) very helpful: Prison Assistant Superintendent at Graterford who came under the program," he noted, and 90 per cent of them and all those in prison were not Muslims before entering confinement. "The brothers give everything they have to the program, and certain administrators have been at Holmsburg...."

By Samuel Ayyub Bilal

PHILADELPHIA — Imam Shamsid-Din Ali is a man whose whole life is and has for a long time been committed to the single purpose of helping to improve the human condition, several Bilalian News interviews suggest.

The interviews plus other information collected on Imam Ali show that his commitment was becoming increasingly clear as early as the mid-1960s when he first joined the Nation of Islam, since renamed the World Community of Islam in the West (WCIW).

Within a few months after joining that community he was made a squad leader and eventually became the top officer in Mosque No. 12, here.

That same commitment led him into performing the many important tasks and holding the many important posts he presently holds as a leading member of the WCIW.

All of his work evolves around his position as Imam of Mosque No. 12 where he teaches Islam as well as administrates over seven area mosques. As Imam of the No. 12 Mosque he also is ultimate administrator of one of the largest Sister Clara Muhammad Schools in the WCIW.



Imam Shamsid-Din Ali

BROAD INVOLVEMENT

Not limiting himself to work in the mosque alone, Imam Ali finds himself frequently lecturing at colleges, seminars, before community groups and at prisons throughout America. He is an active member of the 200-year-old Pennsylvania Prison Society and is working diligently to set up a Blight Arrest Pioneer Patrol (BAPP) unit in the Philadelphia area.

To a considerable degree, his ability to perform this work is a result of his fine sense of brotherhood as well as of his commitment to the alleviation of world suffering.

Imam Ali's fine sense of manhood and brotherhood did not in fact just start when he joined the WCIW. To be sure, he started developing that sense early in his acquaintance with community life in Philadelphia to which he came, with his parents as a 5-year-old child.

Taking seriously the city's second name — "City of Brotherly Love" — he began as a youngster developing a concern for and comradeship with his neighborhood peers, which eventually followed him into the WCIW.

"In fact, a lot of us came into the mosque together," he said during an

interview with Bilalian News last summer.

It was during the summer interview, sitting over cups of coffee and snacks of beef-bacon and eggs, that he described and traced for B.N. the results of his attempts to apply the teachings of Islam in helping improve the quality of life here, throughout America, and the rest of the world.

Because of his intense love for the inner-city communities, it was particularly disturbing for him to see the overwhelming destructiveness of gang violence. Therefore, it was to the gang problem that he first turned his attention upon accepting Islam in the 1960s.

DETERRENT TO VIOLENCE

"I had always wanted to reduce gang violence here," he said during a recent interview, "and with Islam I had just what was needed to apply. So we began helping the parents of gang members and the religious leaders in the community to understand the youngsters' problems.

"We went to community and political meetings. We held meetings with people from the district

attorney's office. And though at that time our activities were identified as community activities, that's exactly what they were."

He was an officer in the old Fruit of Islam (FOI) at that time and today Imam Ali's work with gangs is legendary.

Simultaneous to working with gangs and families, he was working with young men whom he was helping to train in the mosque. He was deeply immersed with helping the Imam of Mosque No. 12 — at that time Jerimah Shabazz — channel the activities of hundreds of young Muslim brothers.

He loved his work with brothers both in the WCIW and the juveniles on the streets. By working with both groups he was developing invaluable insight into humans, which would serve him later during a crucial period in his personal growth and development.

BLESSING IN DISGUISE

The theory is that some strong forces jealous of his successful work with the youngsters wanted him out of the city. When it became convenient they helped frame him on a major criminal charge.

"Little did I realize that it was a blessing in disguise," he says without a trace of bitterness as he reflects on those fateful days in the Philadelphia County Jail, and later at the Holmsburg where he was sent.

"Master Elijah Muhammad sent a message to me when I first went to jail. He said, 'Brother, study human nature and you'll find that some of our Bilalian people actually think criminal.' I took that to mean people thought criminal in certain respects and that brought me to begin looking into the minds of people.

"I began to have interest in books that depict human expressions — books that directed us to viewing motivations of people. I also became interested in the minds of frontier type people, who established governments — for example Plato and education. I really became interested in the forces that were in the mind that were expressed by philosophers and educators.

The young captain became a pioneer of sorts himself. He began to study out of curiosity what motivated a prison administrator, what made him stay on the job. I wanted to know what caused education to neglect the call for aid in people... Plato tried to deal with it, he said.

"I searched out pedagogy books... read so many books that I saw that only one or two pages in some of them were worth reading... Everything Allah blessed me to study I shared with the brothers. I started with the Muslims..."

There were many Muslims in isolation at Holmsburg where he spent more than two years. Many inmates had little or no education, he said. "Therefore we set up classes in reading, writing, arithmetic and human expressions."

The classes began attracting the attention of top educators in the local prison system and eventually was adopted as the system's curriculum for both Muslims and non-Muslims.

"In human expression classes we taught that everyone should learn as much about themselves as they can — about themselves as human beings. We began tying the basic human expression subjects into math and philosophy and other higher courses of learning," Imam Shamsid-Din Ali said. When he left Holmsburg Jail and went to Graterford Prison — where he spent two years and five months — Imam Ali set up the same educational program there.

(Continued on page 27)