

Serving the Community

By Rhena M. Muhammad

"I have always had the desire to help people," explained educator Dorothy Fardan of the Clara Muhammad Elementary school in Chicago. Today, her desire to help others by putting them in touch with human reality is realized through the classes she instructs at the Muslim school.

"I am teaching two courses in the social science area, and I also help to develop the curriculum here at the school. Right now," she continued, "I am working on two books, one to be used in the school."

Working at the school also affords Sister Fardan the chance to use her background training — degrees in sociology and anthropology — to bring some understanding to the problems that can sometimes plague human existence.

SCIENTIFIC ILLUSION

"The study of human existence and behavior in Western societies," she pointed out, "is viewed only from two perspectives: 'physical and behavioral. The whole study of humanity in the West is a complete illusion, based on scientific pretensions.

"There is no attention given to the inner or spiritual self, and I've always been averse to approaching the disciplines that way," said the former college instructress. Ironically, it was in the college classroom where the realization that these values were incomplete first came to her.

Raised in a small farming community in rural Kentucky, the slender ex-nun grew up in what she describes as "a natural setting. The biggest influence in my life was growing up on a farm and living there until I was 20.

"AND EARLY TO RISE..."

Living in these natural surroundings had an effect on her that was almost hard for her to sever, for when the time came for her to go to college and leave her family home, "I chose a church school — one near the farm — so that I would not have to be too far away. After being there for two weeks, I came back home."

Eventually, she left again, and in 1962, after receiving a master's degree from the University of Kentucky, she became a nun.

"Religion was still the same dominant force in my life that it had always been, so along with my desire to serve people, I joined the Sisters of Social Service in California," Sis. Fardan said.

"There," she related, "I thought that I would be free of all material burdens." After only a six-month stay, Sis. Fardan had to return home because of her father's illness. While still at home, instead of joining another convent, she enrolled in the University of Kentucky where in 1967 she received a post-graduate degree in anthropology.

RELIGIOUS "FADE-OUT"

It was during her graduate studies also, that Sis. Fardan began to encounter her first doubts about her

religious convictions: "All that I had known about Catholicism and Christianity began to fade out. I had doubts about a lot of things because what I knew to be natural was not mixing with what was being taught — things like the Virgin Birth.

During a teaching stint at Beloit College from 1967 to 1969, "I was involved in student political rights. I also became disenchanted with America, as this was during the time of 'Hippies,' the war, and a whole period of social unrest."

A four-month stay in England while writing books followed, because "I thought I was through with America for good."

FALSE ACADEMIC LIFE

But she wasn't. She came back to the States where she taught in a New York university. "Academic life there was so false," she related. "Many of the professors and students had no idea of what life was outside of their world. I finally walked out of there with two months left to go on my contract."

In search of a "new world," she went to a Black Panther-sponsored rally in Washington, D.C. where she met her eventual husband in 1971.

Dorothy Fardan, who had newly embraced Islam, and her husband, a Muslim and follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad, were in for some self-admitted hard times in the years to come.

They ventured South first, and then North to Canada, where Dorothy taught at some Canadian colleges. Hearing of a need for teachers in Jamaica, the couple went there, where they stayed until August of 1975.

Along with some former students, she started a commune near Boston, that lasted three months — "unreliability broke it up," she stated.

What was it like, being married to someone then known as a Black Muslim, a follower of the firey Elijah Muhammad? "My husband was familiar with different schools of thought in Islam, and he taught what I know of it in the beginning. He encouraged me to investigate other disciplines — but he made it clear that he was a follower of the Honorable Elijah Muhammad.

"But it made sense for me to be a follower of him, too, given my feelings of America at the time. I read his articles and books and the Holy Quran, though I could not go in a Mosque," the talented sister lamented.

In August, 1975, when Chief Imam Wallace Muhammad broke down the racial barriers that had separated Muslims of all races in the Western World, Dorothy Fardan "registered in the mosque in New York as soon as we heard the news."

The recipient of much notoriety at first, Fardan and her husband came to Chicago at the request of the Chief Imam Muhammad in 1976 where she has since been involved in the Clara Muhammad School.

"I don't think I have served enough yet. To me, the first thing to serving the community is trying to solve the questions inside you as they relate to God."



Dorothy Fardan