

## A Leap of Faith and the Power to Transform

From quiet reflection to confident reversion, Alaya's search for belonging led her to Islam, where she found not only a community but a deeper connection to her true self.

Written by Bea Kress

It was the summer just before her sophomore year of high school when Alaya Bolds made the decision that would change her life: she chose to revert to Islam. Growing up in a family that was never particularly religious, Alaya always felt an unexplainable pull whenever she encountered Muslims in her daily life. "It felt like a calling," she said. As a 15-year-old girl from Chicago with no prior connections to the Islamic faith, Alaya never expected to make such a bold and life-altering decision.

Conversations surrounding religions had always interested Alaya, creating a desire to find a community that aligned with her own morals and strengthened her beliefs. "I knew God was out there, but I never previously put the effort into creating a relationship with them," Alaya said, reflecting on the beginning of her journey. It started with self-research, YouTube videos, articles, and readings. With no support system at the time, she felt overwhelmed and lost, not knowing where to start. Knowing that Islam is the fastest growing religion in the world (Pew Research, 2015), Alaya felt even better about her reversion.

After intensive research and soulful contemplation, Alaya took her shahada—which translates to "declaration of faith."

*"Ash-hadu an la ilaha illa Allah, Wa ash-hadu anna Muhammadan Rasulu-Allah"*  
*"I bear witness that there is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God"*

Despite preparing for the worst when it came to the reactions of others, Alaya felt like her true self for the first time in her life. "I felt complete, internally grounded." The first person she told about her religious journey was her older sister, Alexis. Even though she lacked a personal understanding, Alexis supported Alaya in every step of her journey by creating a safe space where she never felt judged or pressured to change her choice. "My sister made me realize that it's okay to make decisions different from others in our close circle. We all don't have to have the same beliefs when it comes to religion. She really just felt like a safe space." In contrast, her mother was hesitant about her religious decision as it was abrupt, skeptical that it was just a phase. After the first year went by, Alaya's mother came around after seeing how dedicated she was after her first Ramadan and wholeheartedly embraced her daughter's newfound religious identity.

Her cousin, Johnnay, was considering reverting to Islam before knowing about Alaya's reversion. Once she found out, Johnnay felt more certain in her own path inspired by Alaya. Coming from a family where most identified as Christian, Johnnay realized that she was not

alone and had a support system close to her. This bond not only strengthened Johnnay's own reversion but also gave Alaya the confidence to stand firm in her new faith.

That confidence was put to the test at school, where, in typical high school fashion, students were quick with their gossip. Alaya, more confident than ever, walked through hallways with ease and tuned out the whisperings around her. "I remember that word got out that I reverted right before the year started. People that I wasn't close with in my school thought I was a walking myth." Being the only Muslim at her school, she felt isolated.

Alaya's journey through university life has been marked by subtle, yet uncomfortable, exclusions. In class discussions, she often felt like the token minority, expected to represent an entire community's viewpoint based on her physical appearance in white majority spaces. Seeking comfort, Alaya found herself drawn to the quieter corners of campus. At a black Muslim event two years ago, she met Huda, who was born Muslim through family lineage and grew up in Somalia. The two almost instantly clicked, swapping stories about their experiences on campus. Huda explained that she indirectly learned from Alaya's attitude and own morals. Being able to see how Islam affects someone's core, through character and not words, was eye-opening. They shared how the embrace of Black student spaces gives them a sense of belonging and safety.

Hendrick's Chapel and Schine Student Center are the only buildings on campus that have dedicated prayer rooms, with only Hendrick's including an accessible washroom. Before prayer, those practicing must purify themselves by cleansing certain body parts with water, the feet being last. Imagine how awkward it may be to cleanse your bare feet in a random sink while a few sorority girls walk in. Huda and Alaya expressed how difficult it is to go from class to a prayer space on campus, with there only being two options.

Hendrick's hosts Jummah Prayer, a community service, every Friday at 1:10 p.m. in the Main Chapel. Arriving early, Alaya helped Huda and a couple other girls in setting up the beautifully colored prayer mats. Men and women pray in separate sections, with the men on the lower level and women on the stage. Friday Prayer is mandatory for all males of age, but many women and children attend as well.

As a volunteer melodically recites the adhan, call to prayer, one by one the prayer mats begin to fill. Alaya situates herself on the mat as the imam, leader of prayer, begins the sermon. Tears fill her eyes as they recite the Quran in English and Arabic. "The togetherness, it makes me feel emotional because we are together as one ummah. For me it's like a reset of the week. All of my personal struggles and challenges throughout the week go away after attending Friday Prayer."

As the prayers come to an end and the room fills with quiet conversation, Alaya deeply breathes in, feeling a sense of renewal. Surrounded by others who share her faith, she feels not just grounded but also seen. The weekly ritual of Friday Prayer has become a powerful anchor throughout her college years, giving her time to reflect, recharge, and reconnect with her

community and self. These are the moments that Alaya realizes just how far she's come on her path to self-discovery.