

“Donna,” Citizen of Palos Heights and Member of the Reformed Church

When the controversy in Palos Heights was in full swing, there was a sense that the majority of the city’s population opposed the sale of the Reformed Church of Palos Heights to the Al Salam Mosque Foundation. Years later, however, some of the most vocal opponents were unwilling to be interviewed. Karen Hayes, who described Islam as a “false religion” during the dispute, declined a request to be interviewed by the Pluralism Project, suggesting that the dispute was behind them. She added, “It was really about the traffic and parking.” One local resident who opposed the mosque, “Donna,” was willing to give her perspective on the controversy; in order to speak candidly, she asked that her real name not be used.

Donna is, a bright, personable woman who works in technology sales. Small and slight, while she is in her mid-forties, she looks much younger. Donna grew up in Palos Heights and began attending the Reformed Church when she was seven years old. She recalls many happy times in the old church building on 127th Street. Donna came back to the area shortly after college to be closer to family and church. “I think it is just a very friendly community, from my perspective, and people are very much family-oriented, and there’s certainly lots of activities for the kids, and lots of parks, and lots of just community events.” Everyone Donna knew went to church, whether Christian Reformed, Dutch Reformed, or Catholic.

Donna was shocked when she learned that a mosque had put in an offer to buy the Reformed Church. “I just remember feeling like ‘Oh my gosh.’ I always felt that we would sell it to another church. The building was dedicated as a Christian facility. We were hoping that another church would buy it. I just assumed another church would.” Her feelings were shared by many in the church, as well as many in the wider Palos community: “Everybody was very shocked and people I talked to had the same opinion, that they thought it was going to remain a Christian facility and that the general feeling was that this wasn’t what we want.” She recalls that the mosque was “definitely a source of conversation at most community activities.” Many people, knowing that she attended the Reformed Church of Palos Heights, would ask Donna “what was going on and how could we let this happen?”

Donna grew up in the Reformed Church: “I had a lot of ties to the physical building. I was married in that building, one son was baptized there, and I wasn’t even really sure we needed to move.” The move, and the sale of the church, was prompted by the growth of the congregation: a larger church would be built in a nearby town. However, many in the congregation wanted to stay in Palos Heights, this feeling became stronger with the news that Muslims were buying the church. “I felt that maybe this was a sign from God that maybe this wasn’t the right time to move.... so maybe this just was all a sign that maybe we should just stop this.”

Donna explained, "My thought was this building was dedicated to do God's work, and that's how I felt it should stay. I mean, it says that right on the cornerstone of the building: that it was dedicated as a church, this building, and that's how I felt it should be. But again, a building is just a building, and it's not the church, we're the church. But I had a lot of emotions tied to that building." Her Pastor, Rev. Semeyn, spoke to the church community often during the dispute. She recalls his words: "'As Christians we need to love our neighbors and this is just a building, it's not the church, you know, the people are the church.' Which is true. And that we needed to really represent what it means to be a Christian. So, this is when your faith, I guess, is tested."

Donna doesn't believe that she held any bias against the Muslims: "We're all created equal and I have a good friend who is a Muslim and a wonderful person. So I don't hold it against all these people. I just felt bad about leaving that building. And as such, I would've felt better about leaving if it would have been a Christian church that would perpetuate Christianity within the community." She sees Palos Heights as a Christian community: "Most everybody I know goes to church, worships in that way. And it's a part of their family, doing Christian activities. Whether that be, not only just going to church, but being involved in Christian education, doing a lot of missionary work or helping the less fortunate. And so, part of that is just being kind and being accepting." She laughed at her final statement, paused, and reflected: "We didn't show a Christian way towards these people."

Remembering the time of the dispute, she notes, "I mean, it was really ugly. People got really ugly and said things that were just really embarrassing and mean to the Muslims. I was surprised at how strong some people felt." She dismisses the claim that the dispute was fueled by the city's need for recreation: "I think it was obvious, the basic feeling was we didn't want that facility to be a mosque. The majority of the community, certainly that lived in Palos Heights, felt that way." She recalls, "I know Pastor Semeyn got lots of calls -- threatening calls, he said -- it was really unfortunate. So the community brought up all these other options for that building to be, but I think, in general the community just didn't want it to be a mosque."

Donna believes that the controversy was motivated by fear. "Fear of change, and wanting things to stay the same." She understands that fear: she likes Palos Heights the way it is. "It was scary to think how that could change, and it wouldn't be how we know it today, which most people really like." She continues, "I don't think there was fear of housing values going down, I don't think that was it. I think it was just fear that the community as we know it today not looking the same, not being the same."

She believes that some people in Palos Heights made generalizations about the Muslims: "That they are doing all these bad things in the Middle East, that they are just basically bad people. We'd have bad people moving into our community. And that's not true; I know that's not true. We'd have different looking people, and different views." That difference, she believes, motivated the fear: "Someone who looks different from you moving into the community. A culture that you don't understand, that's different than your culture; you think of the Middle East you associate a lot of fighting, and people that

are more maybe aggressive, whether that's true or not, people that don't view women as equals. So it's just a fear of really the unknown, and what limited information we have, we make these judgments." She notes, "I have a friend who is a Muslim and a wonderful person, but to look at him you might be afraid of him. He looks kind of scary, actually, but he's the sweetest person in the world."

For many people in Palos Heights, the only knowledge of American Muslims came from the nearby town of Bridgeview, Illinois, which is home to a large mosque and school. Donna notes, "People would use that as an example, 'well look at Bridgeview...' Crimes have gone up. Even I think police – maybe this is just conjecture on my part—I think police reports and things that have been published said it has become rougher since the mosque. So again that was used as an example. 'Look what happened there; look at how bad that was for that community.' Then I remember, there was something, there was some big bust that some Muslim organization was funneling money to al-Qaeda. ... So they closed that down, so that was really a bad thing. Oh my gosh, that's just kind of people's fears, they look at this and think it will bring in bad people, and these were bad people that were giving money to that cause."

Donna does believe that there is some valid cause for concern about the differences in value systems. Her children had a friend who was a Muslim girl: "She had to marry a Muslim, her parents were going to choose her mate, and she didn't have the same rights as her brothers did." Her children have told her that the Muslim kids at their high school stick to themselves, and that some of the boys can be aggressive and disrespectful to the teachers: "Sometimes there is a problem with some of these Muslim boys really not thinking these women teachers in particular had authority over them. Whether that is true or not, that's what they tell me."

Before the dispute, Donna wasn't aware of religious diversity in Palos Heights; even now, she says, "I don't see a lot of Muslims like in the grocery store or anything like that around here." Recently, however, when she was out shopping, she came upon a Muslim woman dressed in black from head to toe [in a burqa] including a black mask over her face [a niqab]. "It scared the bejeebers out of me." She recalls, "I just thought 'Yikes!' It kind of looked almost like a Halloween costume." Donna wondered if she was in mourning, or what might motivate her to dress like that. She continued, "People obviously were taken aback by this, the way this gal looked. I was thinking, 'Gee... Can't you tone that down a little bit? You're really shocking people.' And it's hard to go up and talk to someone and have a conversation with someone who looks like a black ghost." Donna continues, "I have seen the women that have different colors on. And they have it over their head, but you can see their face, you can make a connection. Oh, this is a person, but when you're all covered up, and all you can see is her eyes and you're all in black, that's scary. ... It's hard to make a human connection when you can't see someone's face."

Although Donna didn't want the Mosque Foundation to purchase the church, she was shocked about the offer of \$200,000 for the Muslim community to walk away from the contract. "That just seems like bribery; that just really seems illegal." She notes, "It was

very obvious that they were just trying to buy these people off, to not pursue this purchase.” She was also shocked when the offer was accepted. “Some people felt that was what they wanted all along. They knew that it would cause an uproar so they wanted this money... I don’t know if that’s true, but that was some of the buzz -- that they just wanted the money.” She adds, “Yeah, the whole thing was like ‘wow,’ it was like a TV movie, with all these twists and turns that you wouldn’t expect.”

While Donna did not want the mosque in Palos Heights, she did support the response of Mayor Koldenhoven to the controversy. “He is someone I think is a true Christian. And if we could all be like that, this world would be a better place. You know he went through his son dying through this time. Just a wonderful human being who did what he felt was right. And what he did was the right thing to do. It was a hard thing to do, but it was the right thing to do.” She notes that the majority of those who opposed the mosque also opposed the Mayor, “but I think there are people that think like I do.”

Donna had known Sandy Broadbent before the dispute, and was aware of the activities of the Christian-Muslim Dialogue Group, she attended one presentation at the community center. “It seemed quite healthy. It was a good thing. I think some good things came out of this. Knowledge; people have more knowledge than they did years ago. So that’s good. Knowledge is good, and hopefully some friendships were developed that wouldn’t have developed otherwise.” At the presentation, she remembers one Muslim man, Omar Najib, who eloquently described his faith. “And really, the Muslim faith, they are supposed to be very peaceful people, it is the extremists on their side that cause all these problems. Really, when you hear about what their basic beliefs are, it all sounds very good, very positive. No drinking, no fighting, very peaceful. But yet that is not what you think of, because we think of all the problems in the Middle East, and certainly 9/11, and the extremists.”

In Orland Park, when the same issue came up, Donna notes, “the city council was very clear: ‘Hey, they have every right’ and it was approved.” While she knows that there was considerable community opposition in Orland Park, she notes that “They are a much larger community, much more spread out community. So for them to absorb a mosque probably wouldn’t make as big of an impact.” Orland Park has a population of 60,000, where Palos Heights has 12,000. “If they want to build it and the zoning is OK, they can. But I’m sure there are people that aren’t happy about it, if they live around there in particular, because of all the different times that they would be coming to the mosque.” She continues, “I think Orland probably said, ‘Hey, we are not going to win this, and we can’t oppose their rights. And they have every right to do it. We don’t need this media attention that Palos Heights got.’”

Looking back at the controversy, Donna reflects on the winners and losers in this dispute: “Obviously they didn’t build the mosque in that building. So, that’s really what they wanted to do and they did lose because they didn’t get to do that. But I think we also lost as a community in that we got this national attention, and it was viewed pretty negatively against Palos.” Looking back, her greatest regret about the controversy was the division it

caused in her church. "That's what I really regret." She notes with sadness that some people, including her former Sunday school teachers, moved to other churches.

Years later, the Reformed Church building was purchased by the New Life Church, a non-denominational Christian charismatic church. For a time, the two church communities shared the facility and worshipped together, which, she notes "would've been hard to do if that would have been a mosque." She continues, "So I'm very happy that it remained a Christian church." The New Life Church is a far more diverse congregation than that of her own Reformed Church, which she describes as "WASPy." Coming together, she says "I think that's neat, that's great. And no one has an issue with that, in the community, at all."

Throughout the controversy, and looking back today, Donna's views have not changed: "I felt very strongly that it should remain a Christian church. As I say, I grew up in that church and have a lot of memories in that church. I just wanted it to stay a church, a Christian church. That was my-- wrong or right, I just feel that this community is, you know, a Christian community and that is how I would like it to stay." Asked how she would have responded if the Muslims wanted to buy, for example, the Rec Center across the street from the church, she sighed, and said she would have a problem with that as well. "I wouldn't have a problem with the fact that, you know turning a Rec Center into a mosque, but I would be concerned about how it was going to change the community."

Looking back to the time when Palos Heights was known as "Palos Hates," she notes that this was mostly media sensationalizing, "But it's sad to be associated with that, because it's not that kind of community." She adds, "Do I think that hurt the community? Housing values continue to go up and up and up and they are building huge homes. So, from an economic standpoint I don't think it hurt the community." Donna believes that, if the same controversy were to take place today, the majority of people in Palos Heights would not respond differently.