

# FIGHTING DISCRIMINATION

## AGAINST ARAB AMERICANS

A FOUR-STEP ACTION PLAN FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

BY KATE JACKSON

Shortly after September 11, Terry Singer, PhD, dean of the Raymond A. Kent School of Social Work in Louisville, KY, was invited to discuss healing and community building on a talk radio show. One caller, he remembers, wanted the United States to “bomb the terrorists back into the Stone Age.” But terrorists, Singer explained, are tricky. They hide among women and children and pose a threat and a challenge because they can’t be drawn out.

Another caller, Singer remembers, declared that America should also bomb the women and children because the women will bear more babies who will grow up to be terrorists.

Heard frequently across the nation in the weeks and months following September 11 were the types of sentiments used to justify acts of vengeance, legitimize racial profiling and other forms of discrimination against individuals perceived to be of Arab descent, and inspire hate crimes—from verbal harassment to stoning to, in several cases, murder.

Louisville has become one of the fastest-growing settlement locations for immigrants, particularly refugees, with populations from Cuba, Haiti, Iraq, Iran, Kurdistan, Sudan, and Somalia, including approximately 125 of the “Lost Boys of Sudan.” “This diversity enriches us as a community, but it also poses some special challenges; after September 11, there was a great deal of fear among people,” he says. While Kentucky hasn’t been as violent as some places, says Singer, there has been harassment and discrimination, such as “calls out of automobile windows and graffiti on walls telling people to go home.” There’s been a backlash from state government as well. Pending legislation in the state house of representatives and senate would require each

noncitizen to complete an Immigration and Naturalization Service procedure to get his or her driver’s license.

While September 11 didn’t spark the first fire of discrimination against Arab Americans, it clearly and furiously fanned the flames. Anger and frustration is always latent and borne of fear and ignorance, says Singer. During good times, he suggests, people are willing to be civil toward those they may not like or understand because of pressure to do so. “But once something awful such as September 11 occurs, it feeds fear and brings that which is underneath to the forefront, giving people an excuse to move away from civil types of behavior,” he says.

“It’s not just rhetorical,” agrees Estella Norwood-Evans, PhD, founding director of the Greater Rochester Collaborative MSW Program, a unique collaboration between the State University of New York at Brockport and Nazareth College in Rochester, NY. “Many people who have had latent racist beliefs now have something they can sink their teeth into. They have something concrete to point at and, when people outwardly look different, they are easy targets for discrimination. Women with their heads covered, those who pray a certain number of times a day, and those who adhere to dietary restrictions display outward signs of difference.”

“Discrimination against Arabs is nothing new,” says Emira Habiby-Browne, who, in 1993, left a doctoral program in social work to create the Arab American Family Support Center, an organization that provides services to the Arab American community in Brooklyn, NY, and helps new immigrants understand the American system. “Discrimination has always been there. It just got worse after September 11.”

Just how much worse is difficult to

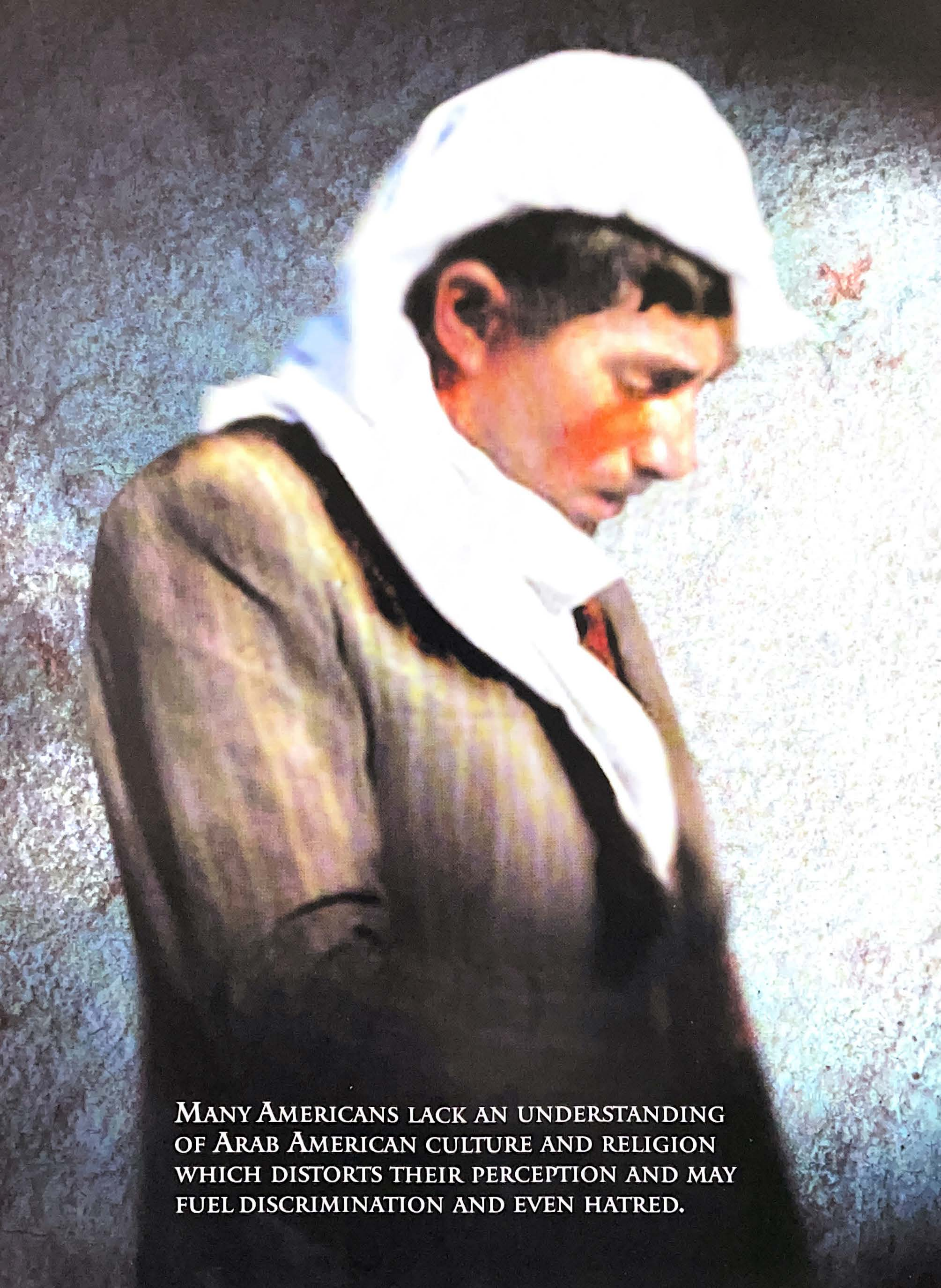
determine. The Arab American community, says Habiby-Browne, generally does not report such incidents to authorities. Consequently, to gauge the scope of the problem and to begin to direct services to solutions, her agency set up a hotline staffed by Arab-speaking individuals through which community members could report incidents of anti-Arab aggression or discrimination. “We’ve had reports of discrimination in the school, the workplace—everywhere,” she says.

In the Arab world, says Habiby-Browne, services are provided by immediate and extended family, and people don’t look outside family to solve problems. “It’s not a cultural practice to talk about one’s problems to strangers,” she says. “However, in the United States, because so many of our families don’t have extended families or may not have any support system, social work is a new concept for them, and we’ve become their support system.” Through her agency, social workers attempt to meet these needs, including those stemming from discrimination. “If it’s a situation in which legal services are needed, we collaborate with legal service organizations who seek legal remedies. If it’s a civil rights issue, we collaborate with civil rights organizations,” she says. “We’re networking with many different organizations that provide direct services in these areas, as well as governmental agencies. We coordinate services, we escort them to appointments to make sure that someone can translate for them, and we help them overcome language and cultural barriers to services.”

### CRISIS AND OPPORTUNITY

While few social workers have the opportunity to work directly with Arab Americans concerning issues of discrimination as do those on Habiby-Browne’s staff, all social





**MANY AMERICANS LACK AN UNDERSTANDING OF ARAB AMERICAN CULTURE AND RELIGION WHICH DISTORTS THEIR PERCEPTION AND MAY FUEL DISCRIMINATION AND EVEN HATRED.**



workers have an opportunity to work in their professional spheres and communities to educate, communicate, and help stem the tide of discrimination. Even before 9/11, “the code of ethics for our profession challenged us to take steps to be proactive in fighting discrimination in all its forms, so it’s embedded in our mission,” explains Norwood-Evans. “Our curriculum has mandated content dealing with oppression and interethnic conflict. Since September 11, there is a heightened awareness. There’s much talk about discrimination and racism, how we look at difference, and how we can be more inclusive.”

It’s often said that a crisis has the potential for both tragedy and opportunity. While it’s difficult to acknowledge positives in the wake of an event as devastating as September 11, says Norwood-Evans, “It’s an important opportunity for us to seize the moment while the interest is there and to call attention to this issue so that it’s not just an episode and so that interest does not go away six months from now. We want to use this moment and ride this wave to keep the momentum going and look for ways to teach and sustain tolerance.”

Habiby-Browne agrees: “Probably the only positive outcome of the tragedy of September 11 is increased concern about discrimination. People are asking more questions, and the need to know more has become obvious.”

Singer urges social workers to step forward and maintain a high profile because they’re in a unique position to help—they understand the hurt that families and communities endure, and they understand social context. They can look for strengths in individuals, families, and communities and build on these strengths to forge solutions.

The ability of social workers to make a difference, experts suggest, relies on a four-part approach:

- seeking self-awareness with respect to prejudice;
- developing true cultural competency;
- maintaining the courage of one’s convictions; and
- committing to some level of social activism.

## SELF-AWARENESS

The first step toward tackling discrimination is to look inward. Social workers themselves may consciously or unconsciously, subtly or more overtly, harbor bias against certain groups or individuals or, more simply, may accept or perpetuate stereotypical notions about people they perceive as different. Because the events of September 11 may have tapped into their own latent racism, it’s crucial, says Norwood-Evans, that social workers develop a critical awareness of their own attitudes and feelings and, recognizing that bias doesn’t come out of a vacuum, trace the source of their ideas and thoughts.

Recalling Martin Luther King, Jr.’s famous assertion that, as children, individuals learn racism at their mothers’ and fathers’ knees, Norwood-Evans notes that racism is fueled by insidious or subtle attitudes that are layered upon us. “To take off those layers takes courage, and it takes a sense of honesty,” she says, “because it’s hard to admit that we may have, at some point, exercised preferential treatment of groups based on height, weight, skin color, eye color, or some other physical or emotional attribute.”

“One of the things I teach is that we all have baggage,” says Singer. “We all come from certain places and certain lives and have baggage that can’t be easily removed. However, when we’re working with problems, communities, and people, we have to set our baggage outside when we come through that door, and we can’t make our problems their problems.” He acknowledges that social workers have their own biases and points not only to education about diversity, but also exposure to diversity, as paramount to understanding.

## EDUCATION

It’s not just enough to know yourself, cautions Norwood-Evans. The second step is to educate yourself. “I know what I know, and I know what I don’t know,” she says. “If you act when you don’t know what you don’t know, you’re in trouble.” Much of the insidious yet unintentional discrimination can be traced to ignorance of, or lack of sensitivity to, cultural differences in general and cultural differences among Arab Americans in particular. “There’s little understanding of the culture,” says Habiby-Browne. Furthermore, she observes, “Americans seem to be brainwashed about who Arab Americans are. We’re not just one faith. Many people don’t understand Islam at all, and in many people’s minds, all Arabs are Muslims and all Muslims are Arabs.”

Many Americans lack an understanding of Arab American culture and religion, which distorts their perception and may fuel discrimination and even hatred. Furthermore, cultural barriers may prevent social workers from understanding Arab American clients and providing appropriate or adequate services. “Most of the Arab American families needing service are poor, and most are new immigrants who don’t speak the language, have just come to this country, don’t understand the system,” says Habiby-Browne. “They’re trying to adjust—their children are becoming American, but they’re expecting them to remain traditional—so there are conflicts. Many social workers don’t understand the dynamics and some of the issues that the children or the parents are experiencing.”

She points to American laws concerning domestic violence as an example. “Some of the new immigrants don’t understand that at all. What we in this country consider abuse, they consider discipline,” she says. “It’s diffi-

cult for them when somebody from child welfare wants to intervene—or, as far as they’re concerned, interfere—and take their children away. There are a tremendous number of barriers because they don’t understand, and the social workers don’t understand.”

Another aspect of the culture that is often misunderstood by social workers is the role of mothers. “They expect mothers to be able to do what American mothers do—to be independent, to have a say in everything, and to know how to get around. Our traditional [Arab] women are not socialized to be independent,” she says. “On the contrary, they’re socialized to be dependent, so they can’t make decisions, don’t travel easily, and don’t get involved in their children’s schools. It’s difficult for social workers to understand, and they judge these women based on American behaviors.”

Social workers, like other Americans, must become more culturally competent. “If you’re unaware of the Muslim need to pray five times a day, it’s easy to schedule meetings that are inconvenient,” says Norwood-Evans. As director of her program, Norwood-Evans no longer schedules meetings on Fridays after sundown because she’s sensitive to the fact that, while there may be few observant Jews on the faculty, it’s a way to show respect of the Jewish Shabbat. Similarly, she explains, a teacher, who is aware that Muslims pray five times daily, can arrange seating to make a Muslim student’s classroom exit less conspicuous.

To act with sensitivity, one requires a foundation of understanding. Habiby-Browne suggests reading about the Arab culture, visiting Arab American resource organizations such as hers, and taking opportunities to bring knowledge to the workplace and community. Her organization has been inundated with calls for speakers on Arab American culture. Singer and Norwood-Evans agree that many opportunities exist to plan educational meetings and forums in schools, offices, churches, and community centers. Singer recalls that some people, even in churches, expressed after September 11 a need “to protect ourselves,” which, he explains, often means taking hard lines against fear and people who are unfamiliar or misunderstood. To combat such thinking and promote understanding, he invited a Muslim spokesperson to educate his staff at the social work school. He admits, “A lot of my faculty, while they’re great supporters of diversity—we teach diversity—knew little about Muslims and Islam.”

## MAINTAINING THE COURAGE OF CONVICTIONS

“When you become aware of your own racist attitudes, all of a sudden you’ll see racist attitudes in your primary groups, and these are your support systems,” says Norwood-Evans. “Once you change your beliefs, you’re like the alcoholic who stops



drinking but is still around alcoholics. You begin to say that you really want to become a different person in terms of racism and discrimination, but everyone in your family makes racist comments at the dinner table or snide remarks at something Peter Jennings says about news in Afghanistan. In your personal or professional world, people may comment that the Vietnamese are taking over all the local businesses or that Haitians are moving into all the Section 8 housing. What do you say?"

According to Norwood-Evans, many people know what needs to be done, but lack the courage to act—to take simply one small step. "Once you know about racism and you don't take any action, you become a latent participant," she observes. "You don't have to move a mountain, but do some goal-setting. Maybe the goal will be to educate one friend or to have the courage to say, 'Don't make racist jokes around me because it makes me uncomfortable'—to speak out even if it means saying something that people don't want to hear."

## TAKING ACTION

The last step for social workers in defeating discrimination is to take action—to engage in some form of social activism. "Social workers have a responsibility to the political realm of community life and health," says Singer. "We understand the larger focus as well as the micro focus, and we have the responsibility, not just to help people adapt and develop strategies for problems in the community, but to actually change the community."

Norwood-Evans' work illustrates some of the ways in which social workers can become activists and advocates. Trained in Israel as a Holocaust educator, she was appointed to and has been active on mayor Bill Johnson's Commission on Race and Ethnic Relations in Rochester, NY. This group of clergy, professional, and community leaders is charged with sensitizing the greater Rochester community to discrimination and working toward change. "Our interfaith team is working on a partner project that is bringing together professionals of various backgrounds in one-on-one relationships to get to know each other on a more personal level," she says. "In that commission, there are many Muslim community leaders who have shared in meetings their awareness of a direct upsurge in discrimination based upon their appearance." Commission members are exploring ways to help the community deal with these conflicts.

Norwood-Evans is also a founding member of the Steering Committee for Pride and Prejudice—a teen summit at the University of Rochester that brought together diverse high school students from Rochester to engage in diversity training. Jewish, Christian, Muslim, African American, Native Amer-

ican, and Hispanic students discussed, among other topics, the Arab-Israeli conflict. The steering committee plans to hold this event annually.

Singer's work similarly demonstrates a commitment to activism. A board member of the Kentucky Refugee Ministries and the Hispanic Latino Coalition, a member of the mayor's Advisory Council for Cultural Affairs, and a volunteer who helped resettle the first Kosovar family in America, Singer is dedicated to community building. "One of the approaches we're taking in Louisville is aligning ourselves with a number of political organizations, such as the American Civil Liberties Union, and helping to sponsor forums that deal with issues such as racial profiling," he says. "We try to create community events where people can come to be informed and also to create a dialogue because these problems don't get fixed without conversation. You can always have laws that will help keep people civil for a while, but you don't have any real change until you have real conversation." It's not easy to create these forums, he says, because it's difficult for people to talk about race, gender, and uncertainty, and because people bring such strongly held beliefs.

While Singer urges social workers to become more politically involved and encourages them, for example, to run for office, Norwood-Evans mentions a number of other ways to become involved, such as organizing town meetings, hosting an event on your block, or writing letters to editors of local newspapers. Most important, she notes, is that the type and level of involvement be appropriate to the individual. Not everyone, she says, must march, protest, or participate in politics. For example, she says, "Many artists have made wonderful contributions toward anti-discrimination, whether through poetry or painting.

"September 11 has challenged us to take the message of antidiscrimination to the community and to offer our skills," continues Norwood-Evans. "We've done it in our curriculum, and we know some of the challenges. We know how tough it is to change attitudes, and we know what's worked and what hasn't worked." The next step for social workers, she suggests, is to make the community your living laboratory. Social workers must take to the community their sensitivity training, awareness of

intergroup dynamics and mediation, and all other conflict-resolution skills. "There are ways to get involved, and it's deadly to take the ostrich stance," she says. "Racism is so entrenched because people are afraid to act. That inaction frightens me, so social workers must know themselves, know where they need to grow in terms of antidiscrimination efforts in their own families or communities, and, finally, develop the courage and make a commitment to bring about some level of change in some small way."

## CARPE DIEM

Like Habiby-Browne, Norwood-Evans fears that the light September 11 has shone on discrimination will dim as time passes. "Although terrorism comes in all forms, unfortunately now people of Middle Eastern descent are being targeted as potential perpetrators. Terrorism is on the rise," Norwood-Evans acknowledges. "We need to continue acting and educating so that everyone from the Middle East is not the target of discrimination."

"There's a tendency, once the problem seems to have gone away, to take it off the burner and not to take enough time with it, although we may not have resolved it," says Singer. "People said they'll never be the same since September 11, but we're almost back to where we were in some ways." It would be a tragic missed opportunity, he cautions, not to keep talking and bridging misunderstandings. "It may be too painful, and people may need respite," he says. "but we need to guard against complacency."

— Kate Jackson is a freelance writer in Lafayette Hill, PA.

## RESOURCES

- American Arab Anti Discrimination Committee  
[www.adc.org](http://www.adc.org)
- American Muslim Council — [www.amconline.org](http://www.amconline.org)
- Arab American Affairs — [www.arab-american-affairs.net](http://www.arab-american-affairs.net)
- Arab American Guide — [www.arabamericanguide.com](http://www.arabamericanguide.com)
- Arab American Institute — [www.aausa.org](http://www.aausa.org)
- Arab American Action Network — [www.aaan.org](http://www.aaan.org)
- Arab\_Net — [www.arab.net](http://www.arab.net)
- Council on American-Islamic Relations  
[www.cair-net.org](http://www.cair-net.org)
- Planet Arabia — [www.planetarabia.com](http://www.planetarabia.com)