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## Needham man helps on documentary about Muslims in America

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By Matt Rocheleau  
Globe Correspondent

Craig Considine says he didn't know any Muslims while growing up in Needham.

But after graduating from high school in 2003 and heading to American University in Washington, D.C., he took a course from Akbar Ahmed, Pakistan's former ambassador to Britain, and his life changed. Meeting Ahmed led Considine to participate in the creation of a documentary film released this month that views American identity through the lens of Muslims.

"He literally blew my mind," Considine said. "I became like a son to him, and he has said that, too."

After graduating with a degree in international relations and getting his masters in politics from the University of London, Considine was one of five students teamed up with Ahmed for a year to put together the film - Journey into America - which is based on hundreds of interviews with Muslims and non-Muslims throughout the United States.

The film makers visited 75 cities, including Needham, Plymouth and Boston. The film includes interviews with a Pilgrim descendant in Plymouth, professor Noam Chomsky at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Barry Hoffman, Pakistan's consul general in Boston.

"This was an unprecedented anthropological study of Muslims living in the United States with one of the world's most well known scholars of Islam," Considine said.

The team finished their interviewing in February, and their work has since been featured on CNN.com, BBC World News America and Al Jazeera English. The 90-minute movie premiered July 4 in the nation's capital as the main event of the Islamic Film Festival, which was part of the four-day Islamic Society of North America's (ISNA) annual convention that draws over 30,000 people annually.

Considine said he plans to join Ahmed and the others to tour the nation promoting their work and showing the movie at many of the communities where they filmed, including - he hopes - in Needham.

Considine is helping Ahmed complete a book about the film-making journey titled, "Journey into America: The Challenge of Islam," which Ahmed said should be released in 2010.

Over 200 surveys that were handed out to students at Needham High School will be used for research for the book, Considine said. Questions included "Can a Muslim be a good American?" "What are the best ways to improve the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims?" and "Have you ever been a victim of prejudice?"

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Ahmed was dubbed “the world’s leading authority on contemporary Islam,” by the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) in 2004. Considine worked for him during his junior and senior years at American.

The professor praised all five students for their hard work and commitment.

“It would have daunted the most hardened traveler,” Ahmed said. “Yet the students never complained ... they were determined to rediscover their own country. These students, for me, are the best ambassadors of America.”

Considine said that despite having had, absolutely no experience in film production, he edited hundreds of hours of material and is pleased with the work.

The central question of the documentary is “What does it mean to be an American?,” said Considine. He said he hopes the film will show that Islam is a diverse religion and Muslims have “a lot to offer this country.”

Considine said it was remembering that both he and his high school classmates harbored stereotypes about Muslims after the Sept. 11, 2001 terrorist attacks that helped spark his interest in Muslim perception in America.

“To be honest, there aren’t many Muslims where I’m from,” he said. “My biggest fear would be to see Muslims in the Boston area treated as a stereotype.”

Considine said he was studying in London when the project first got off the ground and was not able to share in grant funding that other students used. Determined to be a part of the film making, however, he sent out 60 packages including his resume, cover letter, and published articles to ask for support from various organizations.

Dar al Islam, a non-profit from New Mexico, gave him a \$15,000 grant to pay for his travel expenses, but the money had to be stretched pretty far.

“When I wasn’t traveling with the professor, I was a nomad. I had no home and that the biggest challenge for me,” he said.

He relied on fraternity brothers to provide him with places to stay as he traveled the country. “I’m completely indebted to these fine young men,” he said. “I became an expert on couches, and I never want to sleep on another one again.”

The film, which is a follow-up project to Ahmed’s book, “Journey into Islam,” will eventually be available for purchase online and may also appear as a multi-part TV series.

“More information about the film is available at [journeyintoamerica.wordpress.com](http://journeyintoamerica.wordpress.com).

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