

THE LEAGUE OF EXTRAORDINARY WOMEN

At a time when the media spotlight glares on women for all the wrong reasons, there are many individuals beyond the stereotyped headlines who are busy making a difference in the world. Myriam Francois-Cerrah meets talented and inspiring individuals, ordinary women with extraordinary skills, and applauds the efforts of our British Muslim pioneers.

ANISAH MCKENZIE Homemaker & Wing Chun instructor

What do you do and how did you get to where you are today?

I am a revert Muslim from a strict Catholic, Caribbean background. From the age of 16, I embarked on a spiritual journey to find the truth, dipping in and out of a number of belief systems.

Having studied Fine Art, I went on to work in primary schools, spending the last few years working in failing schools, turning them around. During my penultimate year, I became a Muslim, inspired by some year six students.

Today I am what society calls a homemaker, a Simo (literally Mother Teacher) in Kung Fu, and the first Muslim woman to complete all four gradings of the Wing Chun system under my husband, Sifu Garry McKenzie. On entering the school I was confronted with men who really did not want to train with a woman. This spurred me on although now I realise there was no need to compete with the men but to be the best a woman can be.

What do you love most about what you do?

The image of women, particularly of Muslim women, is often unfavourable, portraying us as weak individuals who stay at home, doing nothing. What I love about doing Wing Chun is that it encompasses the whole person, developing your personal and interpersonal skills whilst fundamentally equipping you with the tools to be confident and to be able to protect yourself and those around you.

What drives you?

I am driven by my love of Allah and my love for Islam.

What or who inspires you?

Studying about the *deen* and about the Prophet, peace be upon him, and his tolerance, forbearance, patience and perseverance. His strength has inspired me to insha'Allah inspire Muslim women to have more presence in society.

What advice would you give to a younger you, starting out?

The world is a vast place with many challenges in it. Knowing what I know now, I say all you sisters: gain knowledge

and remember Allah in all you do. Be generous with your time in helping others, spread the word of Islam and follow the way of the Prophet. Learn to protect yourself as it is a *sunnah* of the Prophet.

What obstacles have you faced?

As a Muslim, my greatest challenge was wearing the hijab. Now I love my hijab and I make every effort to use my martial arts to bridge the cultural diversity by teaching all women.

What is your greatest ambition?

To be a good Muslim, God willing, to continually strive to submit to Allah and to dispel the myth that Muslim women are weak and oppressed.

Is there a need for Muslim female role models?

There are already many positive Muslim female role models but we need to do more by rooting out those who are already brilliant wives, mothers, sisters, daughters and teachers.

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