

'Detox' takes care of radicals

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Sayyid Ahmed Amiruddin runs a 12-step program to "detox" Muslim youth who show signs of radicalization. ANDREW WALLACE/TORONTO STAR

Omar shakes his head as he recalls "the brothers," a group of Muslim students who delivered impassioned speeches, laced with Al Qaeda-inspired extremist ideology, during Friday prayer sermons at his Mississauga high school.

"Slowly they started getting to your head," remembers the 18-year-old about his days at Meadowvale Secondary School, where sermons were led by students who were later arrested for belonging to an alleged homegrown terror cell.

"I was falling into their trap," says the man, who asked that his real name not be used.

Luckily, he says, he didn't fall far. A religious leader, Sheik Sayyid Ahmed Amiruddin, saw Omar was asking questions about jihad and defending Muslim brothers overseas, and "red-flagged" the teen as someone becoming radicalized.

Amiruddin intervened, "detoxing" the teen by espousing a more spiritual interpretation of Islam and emphasizing the need to realize one's responsibility as a Muslim in Canada.

When news broke, three years ago today, that the so-called Toronto 18 terror cell had been broken up in raids that resulted in the arrest of 14 adults and four youth, Omar thought: "That could've been me. ... If I had kept hearing that stuff over and over, maybe I could've been there."

Following the arrests, the sheik devised a 12-step detox program that treats and counsels young Muslims who are sympathetic to extremist ideology.

In December 2008, Amiruddin presented his program to members of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police and Muslim community, calling on the community to support the program financially and the authorities to endorse it.

"We are not looking to demonize youth in our community and say they're all terrorists," said Amiruddin of the Al Sunnah Foundation of Canada.

He believes extremism can be fought by offering an alternative view of Islam. "We are working to rehabilitate and ensure others don't go down the same path as those arrested."

Since the arrests, one youth has been convicted and one adult has pleaded guilty, which further fuels concerns of homegrown terrorism, says Amiruddin, adding: "Canada needs to have a domestic counter radicalization strategy like those in Britain and the Netherlands."

The program involves promoting peace and tolerance and challenging a narrow-minded brand of the faith that prevents activities such as listening to music and celebrating the Prophet Muhammad's birthday. Often, it is parents who bring their children to Amiruddin.

"You don't realize you're being detoxed," said Omar, adding it took about four months to understand that what he had learned during those Friday sermons was wrong.

"I just thought I was gaining knowledge. If he had come out and said he was detoxing me, I wouldn't go. (Amiruddin) knew how to speak with us."

The program has inspired similar projects by Mohammed Shaikh, director of the Masjid el Noor mosque in Toronto, and Robert Heft of Paradise Forever, a support group for Muslim converts in Toronto. "You challenge them, you get in their face and say 'Why do you believe that?' " said Heft, in a recent interview. "You put doubt in their foundation and then you build them back up."

Masjid el Noor sponsored Amiruddin's detox program and tailored it to meet its own requirements, said Shaikh.

"We have to admit that there are some people among us ... who are up to no good," said Shaikh. <http://www.thestar.com/printArticle/644605>