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North

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*Camp educates
Islamic youth on
traditions, and the
link between
religion and nature*



Facing east, toward the Kaaba in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, instructor Imam Dawood Ya-Sin, right, leads campers from Dar al Islam's Muslim youth camp in the late-afternoon Asr Prayer, the third prayer of the day, in the Santa Fe National Forest near Abiquilú on Wednesday. Campers from around the United States and Canada traveled to the camp.

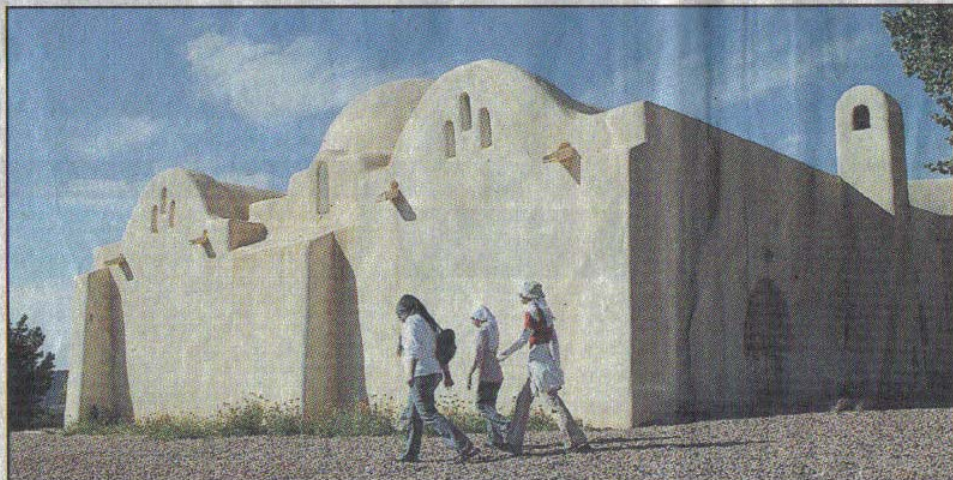
ABIQUIU — Arabic chants spill out into the fresh pre-dawn air as several boys hurry across the compound to the white domed mosque for morning prayer just after 5 a.m.

The prayer is already being recited by a spiritual leader. The boys walk into a washroom toward the back of the mosque and, three at a time, hurriedly cleanse themselves as they've been taught.

They then take their places on straw mats. Women and girls, all wearing head scarves, follow the prayer in a separate space in back.

Welcome to summer camp at Dar al Islam, a 1,600-acre ranch in the middle of Georgia O'Keeffe country. The weeklong summer camp, attended by about 30 Muslim youths this year, ended Saturday.

"It's good to have the



Lubabah Helwani, left, of Dallas, Afia Baig, center, of Troy, Mich., and Allya Abdur-Rahim, of Albuquerque, hurry past the mosque on their way to archery class at Dar al Islam near Abiquiu on Thursday.

opportunity to meet Muslim youth from throughout the country," said Thomas Howard, a 17-year-old camper from Arkansas.

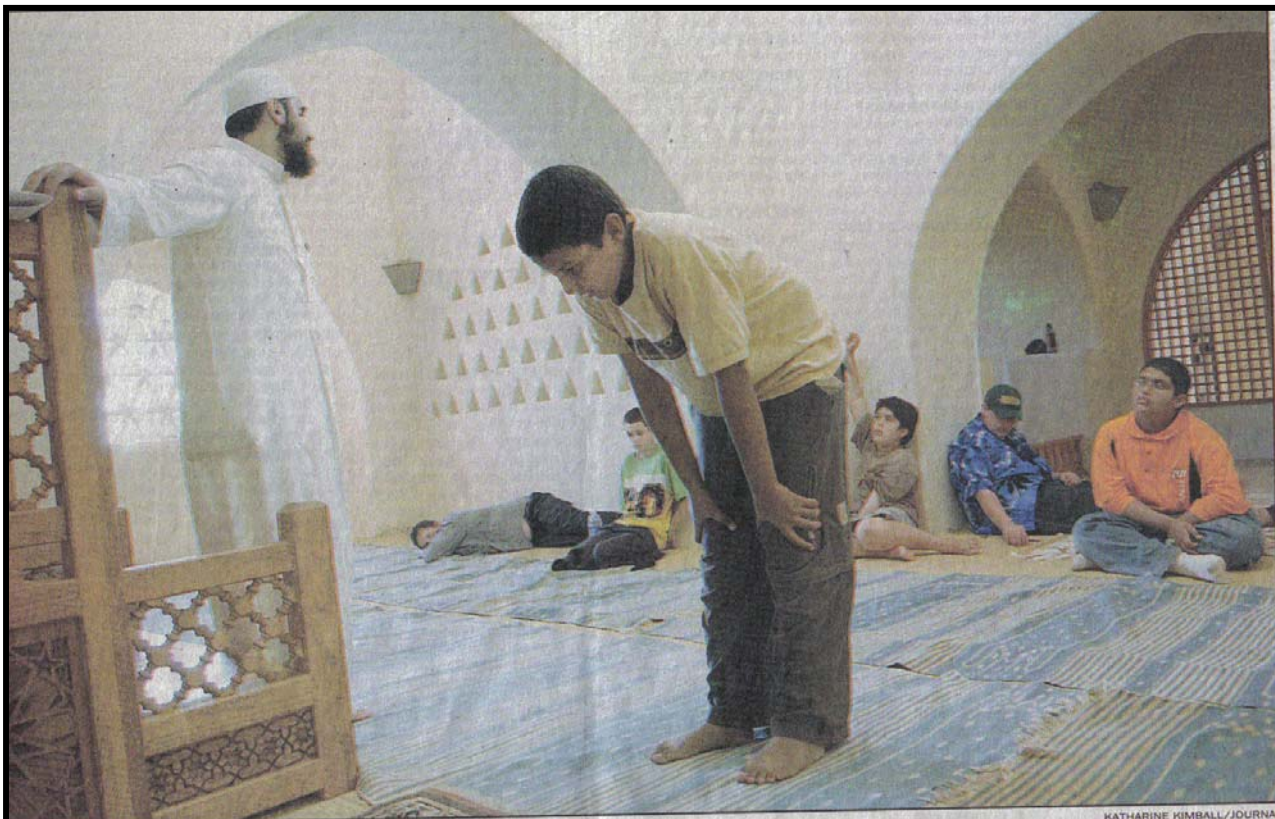
The Muslim youth camp has been held for three years. It strives to reinforce

Islamic teachings and to teach participants that Islam and nature are inseparable, said Imam Dawood Ya-Sin, one of the camp's spiritual leaders from Connecticut.

In the Islamic faith, prayers are recited five

times a day; each prayer is to Allah, or God, and asks for guidance to the right path. Participants also received daily lessons in archery, were taught

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Imam Isam Rajab, left, an imam, or religious leader, from the Islamic Center of New Mexico in Albuquerque, teaches a class on prayer etiquette at the Dar al Islam mosque in Abiquiu on Wednesday. A young boy, 13, of Albuquerque, demonstrates the correct position for bowing during the class.



Umar Bhatti, right, of Mississauga, Ontario, carries a shirtload of dirt and piñon needles while the group constructs a debris hut during an outdoor survival class in the Santa Fe National Forest.



Muhammad Abdur-Rahim, at 8 the youngest camper, lifts a stencil from a paper plate during an art class at the Muslim Youth Camp in Abiquiu in Thursday.

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survival techniques while on hikes in the mountains and were taken swimming at a nearby lake. Spiritual and art lessons were also part of the program.

An eye on everyone

Participants came from as near as Abiquiu and as far as Ontario, Canada. All but four were male. While such camps are common throughout the country, this is the only one in New Mexico, said Walter Declerck, director of the non-profit educational retreat center.

After morning prayer on Thursday, teachers met privately over breakfast and discussed plans for the day. They talked about the possible dangers involved in their lake outing and reached a consensus on the lone rule participants would be asked to obey — that they look out for one another.

"The only rule you have here is to make sure everyone is safe," Ya-Sin said.

Camp nurse Seema Modi, of Ontario, Canada, said she brought her children to the camp to strengthen their faith.

"It's a love for their faith and a love for mankind more than anything else that I want them to experience," Modi said.

But discussions in the camp sometimes turned to how Islam is perceived in this country after 9/11 and amid the fighting in Iraq.

"The students themselves have discussed it," said Ya-Sin, adding that they recognize the double standard.

When the photographs of Muslim prisoners being mistreated at the hands of U.S. soldiers surfaced, the soldiers weren't referred to as Christian fundamentalists, he said.

Isam Rajab, a religious leader who moved to Albuquerque from Kuwait less than a year ago, said it's unfair for people to equate Islam with terrorism. When Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols bombed the Oklahoma City federal building, people didn't blame Christianity, he said.

Jonas Feroz, a 16-year-old from Minnesota, said the suspicious looks and the knowledge that he's going to be checked at borders and airport security no matter what doesn't bother him.

"Muslim people have had tougher times," he said.

Howard called the situation a test of faith.

"So many people are thinking that Islam is a bad religion; that it teaches them terrorism," Rajab said during one of his religious lessons to the group. He said part of the problem is that Muslims

don't tell others what their religion is about.

'We're not cowboys'

But camp participants didn't dwell on those problems when there was archery to be enjoyed.

Archery teacher Pascal Roux, of Connecticut, said he began teaching the sport at 15. Posters of raccoons and turkeys were tacked up to bales of hay for campers to sling their arrows at.

But Roux admonished the group that precision was key, explaining that an ethical hunter knows where his arrow will go.

"We're not cowboys," he said. "We're not going to just fling the arrow at anything that moves."

Muhammad Abdur-Rahim, 8, picked up a red bow that matched his height. He readied an arrow and aimed it at a poster of a turkey. Leaning forward, he released the arrow. It missed the turkey's head by several inches.

But another shot was more successful.

"I got him right next to the eye," Abdur-Rahim said.

Someone complained about aching fingers, but Roux wouldn't have any of it.

"I don't want to hear about your fingers hurting," he said. "Think about people with no hands."

Ibrahim Hanson, 10, of California, said this year was the first time he had attended a Muslim summer camp.

"I like the archery, and we've done some hiking," he said. He later added, "It's like connecting us with nature."

But not everyone was so keen on the outdoors.

Eleven-year-old Afia Baig, of Michigan, said she didn't want to return next year.

"I'm not a nature person," she said.

Declerck, who has been with Dar al Islam for 24 years, said a camp for Muslim college students will be held in a few weeks. The center will also be conducting a program for non-Muslim high school teachers, he said. The goal of the teacher program, he said, is to expose them to the basics of Islam and differentiate between the religion and what some Muslims do in the name of Islam.

"Terrorism has no place in Islam, yet the (9/11) terrorists had Muslim names," he said.

The mission of the Dar al Islam education center, he said, is to build a bridge between Muslims and non-Muslims in this country.

"We are not anti-American," he said.

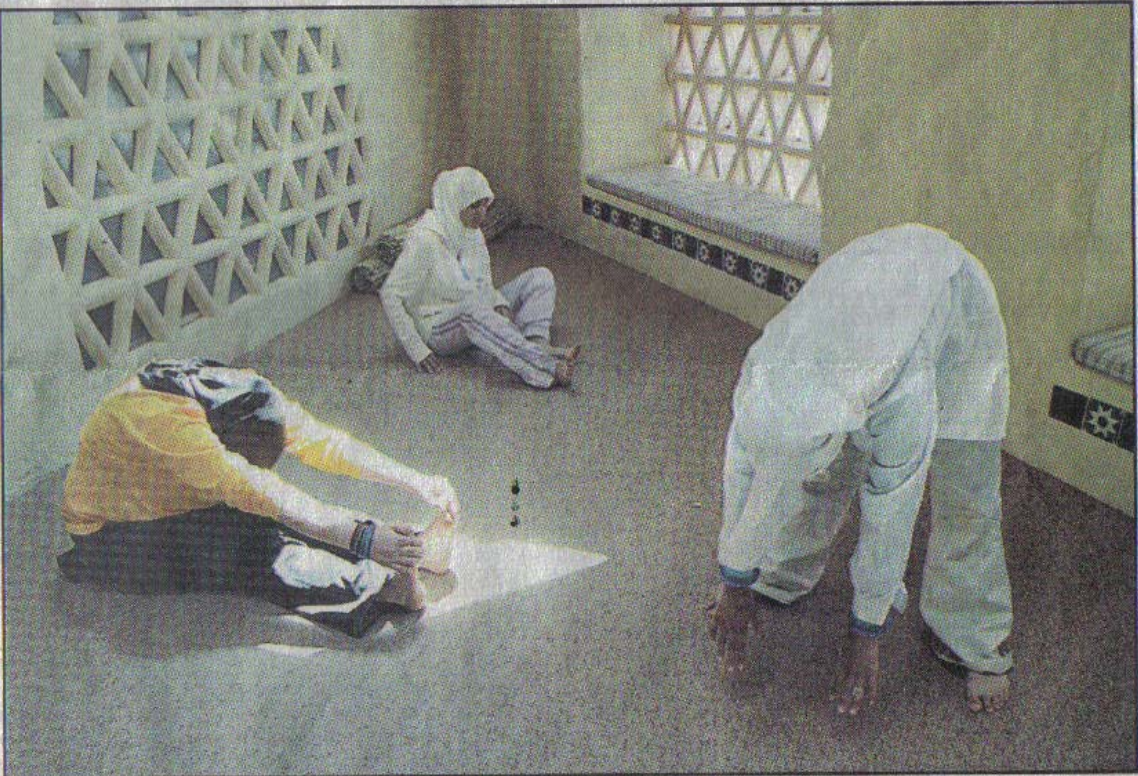


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Camper Safia Baig, 14, shares a laugh with camp counselor Sarah Musa while getting a piggyback ride to avoid prickly burrs at Abiquiu Lake on Thursday. The group visited a secluded area of the lake to swim.



Afia Baig, 11, left, of Troy, Mich., grimaces as she gets some pointers from archery instructor Pascal Roux while camp counselor Sarah Musa watches.



Lubabah Helwani, 16, left, Safia Balg, 14, center, and her sister Afia Balg, 11, stretch their legs after a prayer.



Imam Dawood Ya-Sin, left, washes his feet alongside students Wessam Alhamwi, center, and Ahmad Ihmoidan, both of Fort Smith, Ark., before Dhuhr Prayer in the mosque at Dar al Islam in Abilqu on Thursday. Cleanliness is an important element in Islamic worship.