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## Guv picks a winner

by Jack Lessenberry  
8/22/2007

### These are not easy times to be Muslim in America.

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Last week Jennifer Granholm made probably the best cabinet appointment of her governorship, when she appointed Ismael Ahmed director of the state's Department of Human Services. He is exactly the kind of guy we need more of in government. Born in Brooklyn, he came here at age 6.

He's lived an interesting and worthwhile life. Now 59, he grew up in a home without a great deal of money after his parents split up. After high school he did hitchhikes in the merchant marine, then the Army.

When he came back home, he started working on the line while attending college at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. He got involved with the union and his goal was to be a teacher, but he saw that his community needed help.

His dad was Egyptian, his mom third-generation Lebanese-American. Growth in the Arab-American population accelerated in the 1970s, and nobody was thinking much about doing anything for the new arrivals at the tail end of Orville Hubbard's era.

And so back in the early '70s, "Ish," (everybody calls him Ish) helped start something called the Arab Community Center for Economic and Social Services. Then he began to run it. Today, it is one of the largest and most successful private social welfare groups in the nation.

ACCESS runs more than 90 programs and is willing to help people regardless of whether they are Arab-American. Several years ago, I heard people scoff when Ish announced they were going to raise the money to build a world-class museum of Arab-American history and culture.

Two years ago, the utterly gleaming National Arab American Museum opened on Michigan Avenue in Dearborn, and drew international acclaim.

Ismael Ahmed made it happen. He makes other things happen, too, such as the Concert of Colors. He's been a behind-the-scenes player in Democratic politics for years. He has done perhaps as much as anyone to successfully build bridges between the Arab-American and both the African-American communities and whatever whites are supposed to call themselves these days. That's in part due to his calming personality; he makes even causal acquaintances feel like old friends or family. Yet I strongly doubted that the governor would appoint him, for one sad reason.

Not only is he an Arab-American, but he is also a Muslim. Ish is, frankly, more of an American than I am. He served his country in uniform, married a teacher, had five kids and still somehow managed to finish that teaching degree.

Yet these are not easy times to be Muslim in America. Five years ago, the Democrats nominated him to be a regent of the University of Michigan, and he was badly defeated. This was only a year after 9/11, and it was clear that many Democrats refused to vote for him because of his name.

There was also the contemptible Debbie Schlüssel, who has been attacking Ahmed on blogs for years as an "Islamofascist" and a supporter of terrorists, etc., etc. To assess her credibility, know that when the Virginia Tech shootings happened in April, and we learned that the killer was Asian, ditzzy Debbie was all over the blogs, screeching that the

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killer was most likely a ... Pakistani Muslim!

He was, of course, a messed-up Korean-American, but our girl didn't care. "Even if it does not turn out that the shooter was Muslim, this is a demonstration to Muslim jihadists all over that it is extremely easy to shoot and kill American college students." (Next week: John Wilkes Booth, proto-Muslim terrorist!)

Fortunately, our governor was brave enough to bypass the bigots. And despite the haters, Ahmed's confirmation doesn't seem to be in any doubt. His blood pressure, however, may be something else again. Michigan has been starving social services for years. Happily, Ahmed doesn't feel obliged to spout right-wing self-help nonsense. He knows there are a lot of people who need help.

"I want to shine a spotlight on need," he told me. He talked of state social workers with impossible caseloads, and the foster care mess. He knows how to fix such things ... if he has the money. Human services have taken cut after cut, and his department desperately needs more funds. Trouble is, it may have to do even more with even less.

The state budget deficit is huge, and there will be a great temptation to start balancing it on the backs of the poor. Ismael Ahmed knows all that, but has a history of doing the impossible, and at the very least he won't just sit there and see the poor destroyed without putting up a fight.

**Watching newspapers die:** Just the facts, ma'am: Here's statistical proof as to what Detroit-area readers think of their newspapers these days. In July 2006, the *Detroit Free Press* circulation was 315,519. Over the last year, as the paper became more and more Gannettized, that dropped to 305,137. That's a loss of more than 10,000 customers.

*The Detroit News*, which was pretty much destroyed by two decades of Gannett ownership before being partially liberated in 2005, lost subscribers too, but only a third as many. It now sells 192,722 copies a day. (Twenty years ago, before being combined in a competition-killing monopoly business agreement, each paper had more than 600,000 subscribers.)

For an even clearer indication of the marketing genius of Gannett, the all-dominant partner in the Detroit newspaper partnership, consider the circulation of the Sunday paper, which is purely a Gannett product, except for a *News* editorial page stuck in. It fell fastest of all, from 652,000 last year to 625,000 this year.

How did the Gannett-controlled Detroit newspaper partnership respond to this staggering vote of no confidence? By getting rid of all their circulation customer service staff! In a memo they sent to the soon-to-be-axed employees, the corporate monster announced, "Our customer service operation will be consolidated into a Gannett regional call center in Tulsa, Oklahoma." That change, which becomes effective Oct. 14, "will mean the elimination of most customer service positions." However, wage slaves take heart. There will be "retention of a few part-time jobs."

Naturally, I am sure the flacks would tell you that service like this is has no relation to the fact that Gannett's stock price has fallen 42 percent over the last three years, or that rumors of a takeover of the company are sweeping Wall Street. I do have an idea to save Detroit's newspapers, however:

Heavily promote keeping pet guinea pigs. They constantly pee, and require massive amounts of newspapers to line the bottom of their cages. The newspapers are unwilling to do much about quality, but a few cheap summer interns could puff up the delights of pig ownership.

**Dripping with Gore:** Last week I wrote about the importance of former Vice President Al Gore's new book, *The Assault on Reason*. Friday night, I will be part of a panel discussion about it, starting at 7 p.m. at the Barnes & Noble on Main Street in Royal Oak. My fellow panelists will be Nancy Skinner, who came close to beating Old Joe Knollenberg for Congress last year, and Gregory Sumner, a professor of history at the University of Detroit Mercy. They should be interesting; I will wear a clean shirt.

Jack Lessenberry opines weekly for *Metro Times*. Contact him at [letters@metrotimes.com](mailto:letters@metrotimes.com). Send comments to [letters@metrotimes.com](mailto:letters@metrotimes.com). See [www.metrotimes.com](http://www.metrotimes.com) for a link to relevant DEQ documents.

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