

“Gender roles are very defined in Islam.... The roles don’t have to be exactly the same to be equal, and in many regards I feel like that if anything, the women have the upper hand.”

you were a Democrat?” a girl asks her friend who just confessed to a weakness for Republicans. “If there’s a good Democrat, I’ll vote for him,” she replies.

They apply lip gloss, joke about school, poke fun at older men who use personal ads to find a wife. But they also ask whether they would give up their hijab if forced to pick between this symbol of their Muslim identity and education.

Rehab tells them in a soft voice that the choice involves giving up “something important for something essential.”

What about choosing between education and marriage? Will she drop out of school to get married like her sister did?

“No,” she replies, curtly. “My education is not negotiable.”

Drop Rehab’s name in a conversation with Columbia Muslims and they’ll know who you’re talking about.

Search for her name in the archives of the local papers and you’ll find her, low-key but present: She was listed on the honor rolls of West Junior, Rock Bridge High School and MU. She wrote letters to the editor and was quoted speaking on behalf of MU’s Muslim Students Organization.

You can also spot her in pictures: dressed in a long black dress with a black hijab framing her oval face as she offers students herb bread at a high school event, or gazing at a candle at a Sept. 11 vigil.

“Yes, it’s obvious I’m Muslim, but I’m also more than that,” she says. “I’m living proof that you can be both a Muslim and an American.”

Rehab is a Muslim activist with an American mind.

“The power that people have here is the vote, their voice and their ability to appeal to the American government,” she says. Her “job” as a Muslim is to seek knowledge and truth, and stand up for human rights and the value of human life. Since an early age, Rehab attended lectures on the Israel-Palestinian conflict and later protested the war in Iraq.

By infusing her actions with purpose, Rehab aims for the state of *taqwa*, an important Quranic concept interpreted to mean God-wariness, or striving in the path of God. For Rehab, God is the only judge, because only God knows what is in your heart of hearts.

“It makes you re-examine what you believe every day,” she says. “Why am I doing this? Why do I dress this way? Why do I eat these things?”

Even for something as insignificant as going to the movies, Rehab might say her intention is to spend time with friends and create stronger bonds. Or, she adds, their purpose could be relaxation and fun.

It’s all part of being a God-conscious person and always being aware of what you do, Rehab says. Even doing good things — such as an extra prayer — could be for the wrong reason if one attempts to show off her piety.

Not all Muslims are willing to perpetually challenge themselves like Rehab — especially in a college environment. “We are a generation unwilling to sacrifice,” she says. “We want great kids, but we also

want good careers. We’re not really willing to budge on either.”

Rehab keeps her hands in her lap when she talks. She is fidgety, but not shy. A thin streak of black eyeliner accentuates her eyes. A major in broadcast journalism with a minor in religious studies, Rehab protested the first Gulf War in 1991 at an age when few children can navigate a world map. She says she was always aware of events in the world, whereas most American classmates couldn’t place Afghanistan or Iraq.

“We would have bake sales with the youth group to raise money, and I remember running around the mosque, trying to get some of the older men to buy them — guilt them into buying our goodies,” she says, before starting to imitate a young girl with begging puppy dog eyes.

“It’s for the children of Palestine,” she would tell them.

Did it work?

“Of course it worked,” she says proudly.

Rehab has always been comfortable campaigning. She thinks many of her peers in America, both Muslim and non-Muslim, are too concerned with their own lives.

Rehab and her two older sisters stand out because of their veils. Their father, Abdelmunsif El-Buri, tried to caution his daughters that wearing a hijab might stir controversy. They didn’t listen.

Rehab veiled herself before junior high to send a message early on: “Deal with my mind, not with my body.”

“I’m very independent-minded,” ▶▶▶



Rehab chooses fabric for a party dress to wear after her religious engagement on May 28. Rehab got engaged during spring break to Zaid Abassi. The collection of fabrics was brought by Wafa Sharafi, who will travel to Yemen and has offered to ask a seamstress to sew Rehab a customized, traditional dress.