

# PortlandTribune

## Oregon Islamic Academy celebrates first two graduates

*Just returning from Japan, Islamic school's seniors get their diplomas on Saturday*

BY GEOFF PURSINGER

*The Times, Jun 9, 2011*

**Tigard's Oregon Islamic Academy is celebrating a milestone this weekend as its first two seniors collect their diplomas and graduate from high school.**

"This is different than other graduations," said Nima Mohamed, 17, one of two students who will graduate on Saturday. "My whole family graduated from Aloha High School, so that's what I'm used to: Going out to University of Portland and you don't know any of the graduates. This is different. It'll be more personal."

With only 17 students, the small, private school is the high school of the Muslim Education Trust, a Tigard nonprofit that provides primary and secondary education to students.

"I'm going to miss it," said graduating senior Fatima Tarhuni, 18. "We've been here for a long time."

Started four years ago, the Oregon Islamic Academy is just like any other high school, Mohamed said.

As one of the only Islamic schools in the Portland area, students come to the school from all over.

Tarhuni makes the commute each day from Gladstone.

"It's second nature now," said Tarhuni, who has attended the Muslim Educational Trust's K-8 school since kindergarten. "But it's always been a long drive."

The Muslim Educational Trust had not established a high school when Tarhuni first reached her freshman year, and Tarhuni spent a year-and-a-half at Gladstone High School, before coming back to the school when it opened four years ago.

Tarhuni said that she preferred studying at OIA because she said she was discriminated against at her other school.

"The people around you, the response people give you, how they are toward you, I prefer to be here," she said.

Mohamed and Tarhuni said that they had enjoyed their experience at OIA, and never wished that they had gone to a public high school.

"Here we have more one on one time with teachers," Mohamed said. "I can't see it working out any other way for me."

With such a small student body, everyone in the school takes classes together, Mohamed said, which has made the student body like a close-knit family.



Nima Mohamed (left) and Fatima Tarhuni will graduate from Oregon Islamic Academy on Saturday in a three-hour graduation ceremony at Portland State University.

JAIME VALDEZ / THE TIMES

“We have classes like Arabic and religious studies,” Mohamed said. “But we do regular high school things. We’re just a smaller high school.”

Classes begin each morning with prayer and conversations about diversity and compassion. Students share stories from their lives and talk about current events.

“Every month is a different theme,” Mohamed said. “We share stories and talk about different things.”

Students perform community service projects as part of their graduation requirements.

“In Islam, helping others and solving their problems is not only an important virtue, but also a profound act of worship,” said Muslim Educational Trust president Wajdi Said in a statement.

On Sunday, the two seniors returned from a trip to Japan where they participated in Flights of Friendship, a special goodwill mission that helped victims of March’s devastating Japanese earthquake and tsunami.

Mohamed and Tarhuni helped furnish temporary housing for victims of the tsunami, and said it was an experience that they will always remember.

The students spent a week in the country helped boost the economy through sightseeing and shopping at local stores.

“I miss it already,” Tarhuni said. “I loved Japan.”

After graduation this weekend, Mohamed said she plans to study at Lewis & Clark College in Portland.

“I’m ready for something different, but it’ll take some getting used to,” she said.

The small-school feel is what drew her to Lewis & Clark, she said.

“I liked the feel of it,” she said. “It reminded me of here.”

But first, Mohamed and Tarhuni have to finish the rest of the school year.

“We have graduation on Saturday, and then finals on Monday morning,” she said, laughing. “I’m sure I’ll be checked out mentally by then.”