

GAME CHANGERS

IN THE LAND OF 10,000 INNOVATIONS, VISIONARIES FROM THE GREATER MSP REGION ARE CHANGING THE WAY SPORTS ARE PLAYED.

Profile: ASIYA

Creating a cultural shift might be a lofty idea for a single sporting garment, but that's what Minneapolis-based ASIYA hopes to achieve with its line of modest sportswear designed for Muslim girls. ASIYA's first product is a made-in-the-U.S.A. sport hijab, or head covering worn by Muslim women, designed to be comfortable during play.

PROFILE > ASIYA

TYPE > Culturally appropriate athleticwear

STORY THEMES > Social impact
Entrepreneurship
Apparel and design
Fundraising and PRI
Youth sports

OVERVIEW > For Muslim girls, playing sports sometimes is inhibited by the clothing they wear as part of their faith. A particular challenge is the hijab, a traditional head covering. A start-up in Minneapolis called ASIYA has created a sport hijab that blends religious tradition with hi-tech athleticwear. Co-founded by Fatimah Hussein, an immigrant to the city who runs a sports program for Muslim girls (who are the product's beta-testers), ASIYA has benefited from the region's culture of entrepreneurial support and non-traditional funding opportunities such as a start-up competition and charity-focused investing.

KEY PEOPLE > Fatimah Hussein, co-founder and CEO
Jamie Glover, co-founder and president

KEY QUOTE > *"We can start this norm in the Muslim community to say sports are for everyone. And if clothing is a barrier, this hijab is able to get that barrier out of the way... There's girls in the program who have started to play for their schools, and their parents come back and say 'I've seen my daughter change.'"*
- Fatimah Hussein

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Profile: ASIYA



Creating a cultural shift might be a lofty idea for a single sporting garment, but that's what Minneapolis-based ASIYA hopes to achieve with its line of modest sportswear designed for Muslim girls. ASIYA's first product is a made-in-the-U.S.A. sport hijab, or head covering worn by Muslim women, designed to be comfortable during play.

"I've been here for over 20 years, and I remember how I felt playing sports and why I stopped," said co-founder and CEO Fatimah Hussein, who hopes young Muslim girls don't feel excluded from sports due to cultural pressures. "We can start this norm in the Muslim community to say sports are for everyone. And if clothing is a barrier, this hijab is able to get that barrier out of the way."

Minneapolis might seem like an unusual place for a company by and for Muslims to thrive, but Hussein and her ASIYA co-founder and president Jamie Glover said there are several reasons the idea took root here.

Part of it is the nature of Minnesota's Muslim community, which includes a large group of East African Muslims who traditionally wear hijabs, and who have been in the United States for decades. The existence of a generation that is established in the community and wants to better the lives of those following them is a crucial piece.

Another is the support network available to startups. "First and foremost, we have benefitted from access to amazing mentors," said Glover. "We received introductions, mentorship and guidance."

Finally, Minnesota is home to startup funding opportunities not available elsewhere that would prove critical to ASIYA's success.

FROM A COMMUNITY GYM TO THE MINNESOTA CUP

ASIYA's story begins in a community gym in Minneapolis, where Hussein was running an open gym program for girls in the community starting in 2008. "Right away, girls were interested in competing, but they didn't have culturally appropriate clothes," she said. In particular, the hijabs they wore could come loose, obscure vision and trap heat.

Working with local community partners and using the girls in the program as beta testers and as a source of ideas, a prototype hijab and uniform were developed. The effort attracted the attention of others in the community who saw potential. "They thought this could become a business," said Hussein. "I didn't really have any interest in being a business, but I did want to see how can I reach out and help more girls. It wasn't just a Minneapolis problem."

Through mutual contacts at the University of Minnesota's Carlson School of Management, Hussein and Glover teamed up to form the business and began enhancing the product.

"We didn't understand all the different fabrics when we built the prototype," said Hussein. "We went back and started to co-create with the girls again, and they tested over 80 different types of fabric." The pair also was connected to local garment designers who helped refine the design further.

ASIYA's big break came when it entered the MN Cup entrepreneurship competition at the Carlson School, where it won the impact division as

well as taking prizes for women-led and minority-led businesses, netting ASIYA \$65,000.

"The Minnesota Cup was very helpful," said Glover, and not just for the prize money. "The entrepreneurial ecosystem at the U gave us a lot of support, and the Cup really emphasizes developing a well-written business plan."

UNIQUE OPPORTUNITIES FOR A UNIQUE BUSINESS

The prize money from the Minnesota Cup was an important boost as ASIYA moved into production. The power of community marketing played a role too.

ASIYA started a Kickstarter campaign, which raised awareness – and capital – around the world. In addition to pre-orders, "quite a bit came from people who wanted to make it succeed," said Glover. These people either simply made a donation without an order, or directed that the hijab they purchased be donated to girls who otherwise might not be able to afford one.

As a social venture, ASIYA also is looking for funding from another unique source: Venn Foundation, a new program-related investment (PRI) firm focused on the charitable impact of investments, rather than returns. Venn, based in Saint Paul, is a 2017 winner at the MN Cup. The investment opportunity Venn is shopping offers favorable terms to ASIYA in terms of interest and repayment, and "investors" are actually donors; any proceeds and interest on their investment will be made available for investment in other charitable ventures, rather than paid out.

Minneapolis-based Target Corp. meanwhile, is also supporting ASIYA through its Target Takeoff program, which engages with and supports startups operating in the field of wellness. ASIYA draws on Target resources – including mentorship, apparel expertise and even office space – while Target learns more about engaging with startup businesses.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE FOR ASIYA AND ITS COMMUNITY

Glover and Hussein are excited to see the hijab catching on at high schools and colleges, a sign of the acceptance of cultural differences in youth sports. "We sell direct to high schools and through University bookstores" in addition to other channels, said Glover. "They treat it like just another part of the uniform. That's a visible communication that a program is inclusive. We think that's going to help."

ASIYA also engages with local sport governing bodies to make sure their product conforms to safety standards and is written into the rules, so that all wearers need to think about is the game.

ASIYA is looking at a swim hijab as a next expansion opportunity, and may explore other forms of modest sportswear as well. But whatever products it creates, the ultimate goal will remain the same: more girls playing sports.

"I see the girls I have been working with build their self-confidence," Hussein said. "There's girls in the program who have started to play for their schools, and their parents come back and say 'I've seen my daughter change.'"

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