



Liquor store in Chicago's South Side.

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SOLIDARITY AT THE LIQUOR STORE?

A new project in Chicago aims to change race relations.

NOT MANY PEOPLE consider the liquor store a place for racial solidarity, but that's the hope of Rami Nashashibi.

Nashashibi, who was born in Jordan and has lived in Chicago since the early 1990s, is the executive director of the Inner-City Muslim Action Network, better known by its acronym of IMAN. He's hoping his organization's new project, Muslim Run, will improve relations between Black residents in Chicago and the Muslim families who run liquor stores and other businesses in Black neighborhoods.

Since the 1970s and '80s, these stores have proliferated throughout predominantly Black communities in cities like Chicago, Detroit and Cleveland. Today, Muslim-owned businesses in Black communities have come to include fast-food restaurants, wireless phone outlets and tax agencies. But the Muslim-owned food and liquor stores are often a site of conflict between the business owners and Black residents. The stores are perceived as a source of major problems in poor neighborhoods because they may be dilapidated and poorly lit, and some are a source of liquor for minors, a haven for illegal drug transactions and a hangout spot for gang bangers, Nashashibi explained.

In Chicago, various community initiatives have sprung up over the years seeking to deny permits to store owners, not just because of moral concerns, but also because of how the community viewed these places.

Nashashibi's group is beginning by gathering information. This spring, the group completed a survey of 27 storeowners and 51 residents in conjunction with the Applied Research Center in the city's Englewood neighborhood.

Some of the more striking conclusions drawn from the

survey: While 70 percent of surveyed store owners felt their businesses "have a positive impact on the community," only 18 percent of residents felt the same; and while more than half the residents surveyed felt there needed to be more grocery stores in the area, 72 percent also said that too many of the existing stores were Muslim-owned.

IMAN plans to put together focus groups around the issues raised in the surveys and facilitate conversation between both sides, establishing trust and allowing a deeper understanding of where each side is coming from. "People still rely on the most cursory stereotypical information about each other even with intense weekly contact," Nashashibi explained.

According to the survey, for Blacks, the only contact most had with a person outside their race was with store owners. Similarly, store owners have their most intense experiences with people outside their racial group while at work. IMAN wants to galvanize something positive out of the frequent contact between these two racial groups.

Other goals include improving the stores' appearances and encouraging changing the business practices of the owners, specifically to stop selling alcohol. Beginning in the 1960s, saying a business was Black-owned was about more than just the name on the lease, Nashashibi said. It signified a set of principles pioneered by Black Muslims about giving back to the community.

"We want to stimulate that sense within the Muslim community," Nashashibi explained, "and challenge Muslim store owners to implement the higher principles and ideals of their faith in their businesses."

—Miriam Y. Cintrón