



**Address at the Coalition of South Florida Muslim Organizations  
(COSMOS) 3rd Annual Community Appreciation Dinner**

**Given by Mark B. Rosenberg  
on February 13, 2013**



*This speech was presented to the Coalition of South Florida Muslim Organizations (COSMOS) 3rd Annual Community Appreciation Dinner at the Miami Airport Convention Center on February 13, 2012.*

Just a few weeks ago, on January 21, we honored the legacy of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his nonviolent and tireless crusade for equality, and on that day, in which we witnessed the historic second swearing-in of President Barack Obama, we also witnessed another historic moment. During this inauguration, on a chilly, gray Washington day, a poet named Richard Blanco took the podium. As many of you probably know, Richard is from right here in Miami, an FIU graduate, and when he stepped up to the microphone that day he broke barriers as the first Hispanic and first openly gay inaugural poet. But, on that day Richard spoke of what brings us together, not what tears us apart. He recited:

*“One sun rose on us today, kindled over our shores,  
peeking over the Smokies,  
greeting the faces of the Great Lakes,  
spreading a simple truth across the Great Plains,  
then charging across the Rockies.*

*One light, waking up rooftops,  
under each one,  
a story told by our silent gestures  
moving behind windows.*

*My face, your face,  
millions of faces in morning's mirrors,  
each one yawning to life,  
crescendoing into our day...*

*Many prayers, but one light  
breathing color into stained glass windows,  
life into the faces of bronze statues,*

*Warmth onto the steps  
of our museums and park benches  
as mothers watch children slide into the day ...*

*We head home:  
through the gloss of rain or weight of snow,  
or the plum blush of dusk, but always -- home,  
always under one sky, our sky.*

*And always one moon  
like a silent drum tapping  
on every rooftop and every window,  
of one country -- all of us --  
facing the stars  
hope -- a new constellation  
waiting for us to map it,  
waiting for us to name it -- together."*

What Richard Blanco described so beautifully that morning is what I would like to talk about tonight. I'd like to talk about the power to move ahead as a people by working together and forging alliances. And how we can bring our diverse community together by bringing what makes us diverse to the table.

Tonight is the perfect night to talk about unity. It is an honor to be here with distinguished members of our community who have made their mark by building bridges. At FIU, we are building bridges as well. In fact, the Muslim religion and culture have served as an important conduit through which we have brought our university community together. But first I'd like to tell you a little bit about FIU's Muslim community.

We don't have an exact number of how many of our students are Muslim – we don't track our students by religious affiliation. But we do know that a few hundred of our international students come from countries with significant Muslim populations; countries such as Iran, Pakistan, Turkey, Bangladesh and Saudi Arabia. And we have many Muslim students from the United States who study at FIU as well. Our Muslim students have come together to create an active and engaged Muslim Student Association, also known as MSA, that has worked to break barriers among the diverse students of FIU: Their events include "Fast-a-Thons," held during the month of Ramadan. During a "Fast-a-Thon" students of other faiths are encouraged to join our Muslim students in fasting for a day. They break the fast together and discuss their experiences at dinner. In the past few years, MSA established Friday Prayers on Campus, which have grown to more than 150 students.

They also invite local scholars during Islamic Awareness Week to speak about topics that are trending in the news and media. These talks are aimed toward non-Muslims. The topics have included: "Islam 101," "What is Jihad?," "Women's rights in Islam," "The Miracle of the Quran," and "Science in Islam." They also have branched outside of FIU and the local area, participating in conferences with MSA representatives from other schools in Florida. Our MSA students have also collaborated with Project Downtown, a local organization that goes every Friday evening to Government Center in Downtown Miami to not only feed, but also get to know and lend an ear to homeless people in our community. Our students also have raised money for Project Downtown.

Working closely with the leadership of our Student Government Association, the MSA was able to create what is now the Serenity room, a room in which Muslim students can offer their daily prayers. More than 50 students use the room daily! Last semester our MSA students helped organize Florida's first ever "Hijab-a-Thon", where female students, both Muslim and non-Muslim, wore hijab for a day, and shared their experiences over dinner.

MSA also helped implement Florida's first ever MSA Olympics, where the MSAs of Broward College, FIU, FSU, Nova, UM, FAU and UCF all competed in flag football, track, soccer, volleyball and other events to raise money for a local Masjid that is under foreclosure. And I'm proud to say, MSA at FIU brought home the gold! It's only been about a month since this semester began, but FIU's MSA already has had more than five events. They began a free weekly Tajweed, or Pronunciation of the Quran, class which has gotten a great response. The current president of MSA, Usman Khan, tells us that in addition to all of the great work they have done in and outside of the university, participating in MSA has helped members gain public speaking skills, social media aptitude, and valuable networking opportunities with local professionals. But most of all, Usman says, being a part of MSA has brought them closer to their religion and allowed them to make friends that they hope will bring them closer to God.

While Usman and our students are certainly leading the way, we at FIU also are committed to representing Muslim culture and the Muslim experience in and outside of the classroom: We are proud to count many Muslims among our faculty. Tonight it was an honor to be introduced by Dr. Mohiaddin Mesbahi, a distinguished faculty member of our Department of Politics and International Relations, who has dedicated his life to expanding our understanding of the world we live in and the role Muslims play in that world. Also joining us tonight is Professor Faisal Kaleem, from our Department of Electrical and Computer Engineering. Many of you know Dr. Kaleem from his deep involvement in our community. Dr. Kaleem also has worked tirelessly to help us understand how technology impacts our society, through his academic contributions and his appearances in the news media. Like Dr. Mesbahi and Dr. Kaleem, our Muslim faculty enrich the experience of our students and our faculty by bringing their unique perspective to teaching, research and community engagement.

At FIU, we also know the power of partnerships. As such, our partnership with the UHI Community Care Clinic is a vital one. As we saw earlier, the UHI Community Care Clinic provides critical care to those in our community who need it most. This is in line

with the mission of our Academic Health Center at FIU, which includes our Herbert Wertheim College of Medicine, our College of Nursing and Health Sciences, and our Stempel College of Public Health and Social Work. The UHI Community Care Clinic is a key part of our Green Family Foundation NeighborhoodHELP program, through which our students in medicine, nursing, social work and other disciplines work with needy families in our community. The clinic is also an important resource for our NeighborhoodHELP families who need medical services, and is an important training ground for our medical students who are doing their clerkships in family medicine. Some of our students have been so inspired by their work at the clinic that they have volunteered their time, beyond their required clinical experiences!

Working together, FIU and the UHI Community Care Clinic are educating the culturally competent and compassionate physicians of tomorrow. In 2011, at FIU, we commemorated the 10th anniversary of a dark chapter in our country's history that affected all of us – the September 11 terrorist attacks. Our Office of Global Learning spearheaded efforts to make FIU's commemoration activities inclusive, so we partnered with our local and global Muslim communities. One of the most highly-attended events was a lecture and discussion given by former Assistant State Attorney, Asad Ba-Yunus, titled "The Experiences of Muslim Americans Post 9/11 and the Rise of Islamophobia." Our School of International and Public Affairs sponsored an interdisciplinary teach-in exploring "9/11, Islam, and the Arab Spring." FIU completed its remembrance on the day of the tenth anniversary with "A Sufi Approach to Healing 9/11." This event, sponsored by the Program in the Study of Spirituality, featured poetry, music, and the dance of Sufi dervishes. The afternoon celebrated love, tolerance, worship of God, inner experience, personal self-discipline, and responsibility – values of the Sufi tradition of Islam, expressed through art and devotion.

Since last summer, more than 2,300 students have enrolled in our Introduction to World Religions courses, where Islam makes up about 1/6<sup>th</sup> of the course content. We also offer 14 courses that focus directly on Islam and nine others that also include some

content about Islam. Through our Middle East Studies Program, part of our School of International and Public Affairs, we offer an Undergraduate certificate in Middle East Studies that focuses on the Muslim world. We also regularly present lectures on Middle East and Muslim Affairs. And we are proud to offer exchange opportunities through our partnership with Gadjadara University in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. But we still hope to do more in the future.

As a model, we have our groundbreaking efforts in Jain Studies. The Jain Endowment spurred an initiative that has allowed us to hire faculty in Jain Studies and fund research; subsidize a study abroad opportunity in India for eight of our students to pursue Jain Studies and support an Indian graduate student to pursue his studies at FIU; and we have acquired more than 500 books for our library on Jain Studies. We know we could do as much or even more with an endowment for Islamic Studies. It would be a great opportunity to increase awareness, education, and research of a community that is 1.5 billion strong across the globe and has had such a significant impact in the United States, South Florida and Latin America, which has such close ties to our region. When we talk about what brings us together there is a common thread that runs through all of our cultures. In the Jewish culture, we call it "tikkun olam." For Muslims it is "Islah." They have both been described as "the common moral imperative to repair the world." This is what we would seek through an endowed Islamic Studies program. It is what we seek at FIU through our curricular and co-curricular programs related to Islam. It is what our Muslim students seek when they proudly celebrate their faith and include those of other faiths in their celebrations. And it is what Richard Blanco spoke of at the inauguration when he described "the one light we move through," "the 'I have a dream' we keep dreaming," "One ground. Our ground," "One wind, our breath," how we all are under "one sky," and ultimately how we are all "One Today."

Thank you.