

2011 National Leadership Conference: A Call to Action **Ameerah R. Gillespie, Online Communications Coordinator**

The 10th Annual National Leadership Conference at the Double Tree hotel sparked a new enthusiasm to push for *real change*, a theme set throughout this year's convention. "This conference is extremely important. It feels great to come together and have an open dialogue with amazing leaders that will effectively push our community forward," said National Network for Arab American Communities (NNAAC) director Nadia Tonova. NNAAC partnered with the Arab American Institute (AAI), compiled over 16 business enhancing workshops, joint live-streaming of social media and panel discussions. In attendance were NNAAC Executive Director, Hassan Jaber, Canadian alliances, leaders from 15 different states as well as local members of the Arab-American community who came together nearly two-hundred strong. Stories shared. Voices heard. Goals set.

"The whole idea of social enterprise and earned income is definitely now the big topic everywhere you go in the non-profit world," said Lena Alhousseini, Executive Director of the Arab-American Family Support Center. She attended the workshop on Maximizing Earned-Income Potential for Non-profits overseen by founder Naomi Takeuchi of 1000 Cranes consulting. "Bringing back some of the ideas like accreditation, I thought were amazing. It will help members to become qualified, take it and run with it and earn income for their organization." Takeuchi's workshop taught members the idea of triple-bottom-line thinking when it comes to building a business. That consists of looking at the financial, social and environmental return of an investment.

Attorney and author of *Fear Inc.: The Roots of the Islamophobia Network in America*, Wajahat Ali, along with other panelists drew a large crowd on post 9/11 fear mongering strategies. Ali cited reports on tactics used to politically exclude Arab-Americans and the Islamic faith. "Sixty-two percent of Americans said they don't know a Muslim," Ali said in hopes to push more Arab and Muslim Americans in fields of media, law, music and other mass-audience reaching areas of study to battle Islamophobia. He said that only 10% of Muslim-Americans are currently in those fields. "In your family and in your community could be the next cultural ambassador to not only America but to the world who can tell the Arab-American and Muslim-American story. People want to know more."

Knowing more is exactly what youth leader Gihad Ali pushes for everyday. The spoken-word poet received The Emerging Leader Award for her leadership work in advocating and inspiring hundreds in her community. After founding the Alliance of Young Women Activists, Ali combined political education, economic awareness and art cross-culturally establishing a ground-breaking movement for Arab youth.

State Representative Rashida Tlaib expressed her drive in continuing direct services for the local community. She also acknowledged how anyone could make a powerful impact by simply speaking up for what is right. In attendance, this is what the mother of Arab-American Mohammad Salman Hamdani did when her son was accused of being associated with the September 11th attacks during his disappearance that day. Talat Hamdani's son was a first-responder. He was found underneath the piles of rubble nearly a year later. He gave his life for the life of others. Hamdani shared her story with President Barack Obama and exemplified how one voice can speak for us all.

"When people have arisen demanding their rights and demanding to be recognized, they began to matter," Arab American Institute President, James Zogby said. "Tell people when you block a mosque in Murfreesboro (Tennessee), you put lives in the Middle East at risk. You put America at

risk. When you profile the airports, you sully the reputation of our country and you put us at risk. All of these things are linked and we're the voice that can ultimately make the connection."