

## Prisoner advocate and storyteller to speak at Falls church.

By Marisa Religa  
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070517 AMIN VISIT1 - NG/MAY DOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER NIAGARA FALLS, N.Y. - Karima Amin prepares to go on the air with Ron Cunningham for Let's Talk About It, in the studio at Niagara Falls High School, Thursday, May 17, 2007.

DOUG BENZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER  
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Prisoners are people too. A simple statement, but one that Karima Amin has learned not everyone believes.

After twenty-four years of teaching in the Buffalo public school system, Karima Amin took a leap of faith and dove into her true passion of story telling.

Although the classroom is where she began sharing her stories which often included a variety of fables, folktales, accounts of history, and personal stories to junior high and high school students, she found much joy in sharing these stories amongst audiences in churches, community centers, libraries, and even one radio station which would captivate an audience that would change her path in life yet again.

The Buffalo radio station 93.7 WBLK was looking to fill a 90-second on-air segment on Monday mornings. Amin jumped at the opportunity and began to share stories of moral lessons that she hoped would impact the lives of listeners and perhaps even encourage them to share these stories with others.

Her intentions were well spent. Amin soon received and accepted an invitation from Attica Prison to speak at a Kwanzaa program in which prisoners joined together in celebration of family history and culture. Although Amin thought this would be a one-shot deal, word of Amin's great story-telling abilities spread and she began to receive invitations from prisons all across New York State.

As she traveled from prison to prison, Amin thought of her work as just that, work, until one day she saw a familiar face behind bars that would drastically and permanently change this outlook.

It was at the Livingston Correctional Facility in Sonyea, New York where she saw her former student behind bars. Her former student, who she recalls, was smart, kind, and a good writer. "He didn't look like he belonged there. I knew him. I knew he was a good kid," noted Amin. It was in this moment that her perspective on prisoners completely changed.

This sight instantly moved Amin to find out more about what it was in the community that brought people to such horrible places. She began to read more about prisoners, talk to more people familiar with the prison system, and see more of what was going on behind the metal bars. Filled with a sense of empowerment Amin felt, "The more I learned the more I wanted to share what I was learning."

Amin learned of the numerous challenges prisoners faced both during their time of incarceration and upon release. Most notable was the focus of prison officials on harsh punishment and torture against prisoners rather than on the availability of therapeutic programs to give prisoners an opportunity to rehabilitate their lives.

According to Amin, another challenge faced by prisoners are the harmful generalizations placed upon them by the general public. "The assumption is that they are the worst things on earth; the worst of the worst, and that's not true." Amin noted many prisoners are suffering from mental illnesses, addictions, and acts of violence from prison gangs that need assistance that is often not made available by the current prison system.

Amin hopes to shatter the idea that because these prisoners got caught up in wrongdoing they no longer deserve to be treated with humanity, let alone be worthy of a second chance at change. This requires addressing issues of employment, housing, reconnecting with family members, and simply being treated as human beings, which are common struggles faced by former incarcerated individuals due to the stigma with which society associates them.

To materialize her goal, Amin became more consciences about the audience she was speaking to and the stories she chose to tell and in 2005 she founded People Are Prisoners Too, Inc., which aims to educate the community on prison issues and emphasize the humanity of both the victim and the offender. “I’m hoping once the community is educated, we’ll see the necessity of change.”

Karima Amin will be leading a program at 6:30 p.m. Thursday, at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of Niagara at 639 Main St. where she will discuss these issues as well as avenues for change. For more information call [754-2830](tel:754-2830).

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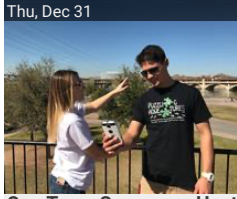
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