

Businessman raises funds for mosque honoring slain hijab-wearing teenager

by [Lauren Markoe](#) in the [July 19, 2017](#) issue

The news came to Fahim Aref while he was on pilgrimage in Mecca: a teenage girl in Virginia had been slain walking to services at her mosque during Ramadan.

Like Aref, she had been trying to deepen her observance of the holy Muslim month.

Aref's *umrah* (religious pilgrimage) changed. He walked around Mecca's Kaaba, the most sacred site in Islam, not for himself, but for Nabra Hassanen, who was bludgeoned to death on June 18. Many Muslims and others believe she was the victim of a hate crime.

"I was devastated," said Aref, writing from Saudi Arabia.

He thought to himself, what if it was one of his own children who had been attacked?

"I wanted to give Nabra a gift, especially since she may have never experienced an *umrah* trip before," said Aref, who lives outside of Chicago. "I wanted her to at least get the reward for mine."

But the 37-year-old father of five thought he could do more. He spearheaded a campaign to name a mosque after her, along with a water well, built for a community of poor Muslims in the West African nation of Mali.

Aref asked for \$25,000 to build a mosque and reached that goal within 24 hours. Total donations for the well and the one-story concrete mosque, which will generate electricity from solar panels, exceeded \$44,700 from 1,987 people by June 28. The extra money will go toward more wells in the region.

Aref is a businessman who also runs a charity called Pious Projects, which is a two-year-old crowdfunding website. Through it and other avenues he has raised money for clean water, schools, and mosques in Mali and the Middle East, as well as Flint, Michigan.

Giving charity on behalf of the dead is common among Muslims, said Sharif Aly, advocacy counsel at Islamic Relief USA, a charity unrelated to Pious Projects. Aref's

fundraiser for a mosque in Hassanen's name falls into the category of what is known in Islam as *sadaqah jariya*, or a legacy donation, Aly said. The good work done in her name is believed to help her on Judgment Day.

"We increase her standing in heaven through our donations on her behalf," and her reward is even greater when this charity is given during the month of Ramadan, Aly explained.

In a separate crowdfunding project, Hassanen's mosque has raised more than \$350,000 for her family through LaunchGood. Hassanen left behind her parents and three younger sisters.

In the fundraising video for the project, which Aref shot with his phone and a GoPro camera, he appears at several of the sites that pilgrims visit while performing *umrah*. In front of the Kaaba, in Islam's holiest mosque, he displays a piece of loose-leaf paper on which he wrote "Nabra" and a prayer that she ascend to the highest level in paradise.

He hopes the mosque project offers an opportunity to others who feel the pain he feels over Hassanen's death but who can't perform *umrah* on her behalf.

Police have said they have no evidence that would lead them to believe that Hassanen's murder was a hate crime, though prosecutors say they haven't ruled out any motive. Hassanen's father believes she was killed because she wore the hijab, and the Council on American-Islamic Relations criticized as premature law enforcement's characterization of the suspect's motive as road rage.

Aref said he can't say for sure whether Hassanen is dead because she was Muslim, but too many hate crimes against Muslims are treated simply as crimes.

"We are in a new era where Islamophobia is the norm," he said. —Religion News Service

A version of this article, which was edited on June 30, appears in the July 19 print edition under the title "People: Fahim Aref and Nabra Hassanen."