

UW-River Falls: School counseling alum named Bush Foundation Fellow

Posted on Tuesday, Jun 21, 2022

>> **WisPolitics is now on the State Affairs network. Get custom keyword notifications, bill tracking and all WisPolitics content. [Get the app or access via desktop.](#)**

June 21, 2022. – During Kaltun Abdikarani's first semester at University of Wisconsin-River Falls as a [school counseling](#) program graduate student, she learned not to advise people.



“Counseling is about using tools to bring out people’s inner wisdom and to help them learn more about themselves,” said Abdikarani, of New Brighton, Minn. “I combined that with the knowledge of my Islamic faith. Putting them together helped me to have a better impact.”

Abdikarani, a May 2020 UWRF school counseling master’s graduate, was one of 24 new fellows chosen by the Bush Foundation for their work in Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and the 23 Native nations that share that same geography. She will receive up to \$100,000 to fund 24 months of study and reflection to build her leadership skills.

The Bush Foundation, based in St. Paul, Minn., chose Abdikarani from among 468 applicants. More than 2,400 people have received support from the fellowship over the past 60 years.

“I am so grateful and so honored for this,” she said of being named a Bush Fellow.

Abdikarani plans to pursue a certificate in Islamic psychology, develop resources and training for teachers and parents of Muslim-American youth and collaborate with spiritual leaders and mental health professionals to cultivate wellness in a culturally responsible way.

Her goal is to reform the program children attend to receive an Islamic education.

“I want to engage youth with spiritual knowledge that supports them in embracing their whole identity,” Abdikarani said.

Traditionally, Islamic education and the Quran are taught through memorization, she said.

“We don’t go into the meaning,” Abdikarani said. “Without learning the meaning, many don’t know how the teachings apply to everyday life.”

After experiencing childhood trauma, Abdikarani found faith. Islam helped her become more resilient, she noted.

“A big part of my healing has been learning and embracing my faith,” Abdikarani said.

Islam teaches of Fitra, the belief that every child is born with a good nature and the environment changes that nature. Counseling taught me how to guide and support people in rediscovering and aligning themselves with that good nature, she said.

Abdikarani attended UWRF for school counseling because counselors help youth to grow socially, emotionally and holistically.

“To me, faith is part of that,” Abdikarani said. “If we want to give somebody a holistic understanding of faith, we must be mindful of how we teach it, how we live and nurture it.”

Abdikarani chose to attend UWRF for her master’s degree because of the flexibility

of the schedule that fit her life as a mother of two children with her husband, Jama Adam. She also received the Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship from the state of Wisconsin which covered most of her graduate costs.

She earned her undergraduate degree in business and marketing from Ohio State University but knew she had other interests in helping others. She worked for seven years in schools as a paraprofessional in mental health and early childhood until she decided to attend UWRF.

Abdikarani, a life and spiritual counselor and coach, started the [Hikma Academy](#) in 2014, which offers the study of Islamic wisdom for intentional living. The academy offers the study of the Quran that helps lead participants to mindfulness and intentionality in every aspect of their lives.

UWRF Counselor Education Professor Mark Gillen said he was thrilled to see Abdikarani named a Bush Foundation Fellow.

“They are hard to get,” he said. “This is a huge deal.”

Seeing graduates from the master’s program parlay their education to other endeavors and using the skills they learned at UWRF is exciting to see, Gillen said.

Abdikarani grew while in the school counseling program.

“She has very good counseling skills and understands working with people,” Gillen said. “She is caring about people. She is a unique and wonderful person to be around. She has a deep sense of compassion. This shines through when she is engaged in work with others.”

Abdikarani also gives back to UWRF by being part of the Stakeholder Committee that helps advise the program, Gillen said.

“She reflects what our students get out of their education and how they take it and add to it,” Gillen said. “We want people to follow their passions, no matter where it takes them.”