Please Touch Museum stages groundbreaking Muslim exhibit with a place to pray

By Kristin E. Holmes
STAFF WRITER

The serene room with violet walls and views of Fairmount Park is a milestone in the 43-year history of the Please Touch Museum.

For the next seven months, the space will be part of an exhibit about Muslim culture around the world, from its architecture, music and art to clothing and food. It marks the first time that the West Philadelphia children’s museum has explored a religion so comprehensively, even providing a prayer room for the visiting faithful.

Petra Watson, a mother of four from West Oak Lane, knelt inside the prayer room during a preview of “America to Zanzibar: Muslim Cultures Near and Far.”

“I see myself here,” Watson said as she emerged. “I see my family and my community.”

And that is the point, said president and CEO Patricia Wellenbach. The exhibit, which opens Feb. 2, reflects a larger effort by the museum to “reimagine” its role, address contemporary social issues, and host events that reflect the region’s diversity, she said.

In the 5,000-square-foot exhibit, children will be able to experience Muslim culture, to trade rugs at a Moroccan marketplace, wrap themselves in colorful Senegalese fabrics, and weigh spices in an Egyptian vendor’s stall.

Objects from a typical Muslim home including prayer rugs and clothing are on display, along with a Quran dating to 1852 on loan from the Free Library of Philadelphia. Two paintings commissioned for the exhibit, and inspired by the artwork of Muslim students, are on the walls. The museum also will host special dance, theater, and musical performances.

“If done well, there is an opportunity to engage children and their families in a positive dialogue around learning and understanding, which we hope will promote greater acceptance and appreciation,” Wellenbach said.

It is possible to “educate the audience about religion, without promoting it or favoring one over another,” said Gretchen Buggeln, a professor of art history and the humanities at Valparaiso University in Indiana and coauthor of Religion in Museums, published in 2017.

“America to Zanzibar” is also an example of museum leaders’ evolving views of the role of their institutions, said Buggeln, a former research director at Winterthur Museum in Delaware. They see their spaces as not just places for “didactic teaching and learning,” but for engagement and conversation — allowing them to compete with online cultural offerings, and survive.

Wellenbach decided to bring “America to Zanzibar” to the Please Touch after seeing it staged at the Children’s Museum of Manhattan, which developed the exhibit.

With a thriving Muslim community estimated at 250,000 — one of the largest in the United States — the
Philadelphia area was a perfect landing spot, Wellenbach said.

The museum amassed about $600,000 in funding from such benefactors as the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, Peco, the Mayor’s Fund for Philadelphia, and the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. A 20-member advisory council made up of Muslim and non-Muslim community members worked on the project for two years.

“As a Muslim who was born and raised in Islam and have often felt somewhat marginalized, I hope [this exhibit inspires a feeling of] validation, and an understanding from our neighbors that we are committed to bridging the gap,” said Salima Suswell, president of Evolve Solutions, a management consulting firm, and leader of the group.

To reflect the lifestyle of Philadelphia Muslims, local families contributed objects to the exhibit. Suswell lent a prayer rug from Saudi Arabia, where she recently completed the hajj pilgrimage to Mecca. Hazami Sayed, founder of Al-Bustan Seeds of Culture, an Arab arts and education group in West Philadelphia, provided colorful mosaic tiles, designed as an expression of Islamic faith.

Wellenbach suggested the prayer room, not only as an example of Muslim culture but a practical place where visitors could fulfill their obligation to pray five times daily.

“When I heard about [the prayer room], I thought how accommodating and thoughtful to incorporate the things that are meaningful to us,” said Tahirah Muhammad, 33, of Overbrook, who plans to bring her 2-year-old daughter to the museum on opening weekend. “This is something we deal with [constantly] when we are on the job, or just go out. Where is there a place to pray?”

Buggeln calls the addition of a prayer room “fascinating.” There may be some parents, she said, “who are troubled by it and others who say it’s great.” She compares it to the rooms reserved for quiet reflection at the U.S. Holocaust Museum and the National Museum of African American History and Culture.

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exhibits. Wellenbach says the Please Touch Museum may as well.

Imam Quaiser Abdullah, of the Quba Institute, a mosque and school in West Philadelphia, says he expects some criticism.

Abdullah, who served on the advisory committee, says some outside the Muslim community may view the exhibit as “putting Islam on this pedestal when it has no right to be there,” while those within the faith may complain that Muslim history and culture are not fully explored. But the imam argues that the exhibit does not intend to elevate Islam above other religions, and that 1,500 years of history cannot be represented in a 5,000-square-foot exhibit for children.

Muhammad is looking forward to more moments like the one that occurred during a visit last summer. An Amish woman wearing her own traditional head covering asked Muhammad about hers.

“She could have just looked me up and down and kept moving,” Muhammad said, “but we had a conversation. And I think this exhibit will do the same. It will open up conversations.”

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