

## Christianne Boudreau's visit to Toronto left us inspired

The mother of Damian Clairmont comes to visit the Islamic Institute of Toronto to share her story

Anela Jadunandan - November 30, 2014

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I had the distinct pleasure of spending last weekend with Christianne (Chris) Boudreau, the mother of Damian Clairmont who was killed in January 2014, fighting for ISIS in Syria. Being curious to learn more about this mother who had to endure losing her 22-year-old son under such circumstances, I wanted to comfort her. You see, we had also lost our 22-year-old son Carl Rayaz, 7 years ago due to an illness. We both had gone through the worst loss any parent could experience.

Chris was coming from Calgary to attend a seminar entitled "Beyond Belief" sponsored by the [Islamic Institute of Toronto](#) about deradicalization. Mohamed (Farhad) Khadim, Education Coordinator of IIT who organized this event, asked if I would be willing to pick her up from the airport and spend some time with her.

I made a large sign that said "Chris" with a happy face, but at the airport, I forgot to hold the sign up. However, she immediately recognized me and ran to me with open arms. As we hugged, I couldn't help but feel a close bond with her. In my mind, I kept wondering how she was coping with all the publicity that she has received over the last few years - especially the last few months from Canadian authorities, the town folks, the news media and social media. What a strong woman she must be!

Not knowing how to really broach the subject about her son's death, I was feeling around the edges to start the conversation as my husband drove us from the airport. I joined her in the back seat of our car and put my hand on hers. I said I was so sorry for her loss. We both started to cry.

"Tell me what happened", I asked. She said that Damian was going through depression when he was seventeen and even attempted suicide. The family had tried everything to help him. But when he converted to Islam, things began to look much better. Damian's Muslim name was Mustafa al-Gharib. He was happy, no more drugs and alcohol - he was much calmer because of his new-found faith.

Then I asked her the most obvious question. "Did you know that he was associating with radicals?". She said no. At first he attended the mosque near to where they lived; Damian was happy and relaxed and family meant everything to him. Then he moved and associated with a different mosque and a different group. He started to change gradually. He became more interested in politics and what was wrong with the world - especially in conflict zones. She just thought he was a young man with his own opinions. After all, in school Damian had always stood up for the kids who were being bullied. In his mind, he was doing the right thing.

She told me that Damian said, "Mom, there are women and children dying in those countries and no one seems to care." When he later told her that he was going to "Egypt to study", no alarm bells went off.

That evening we went to the Islamic Institute of Toronto so Chris could address the youth as part her speaking schedule. There were so many questions. But the one that got me was, "Do you blame Islam and Muslims for the death of your son?" Everyone held their breath. I couldn't look her in the eyes. "No, I don't blame Muslims or Islam for what happened to my son. I blame misguidance and bad choices. It is ideology similar to that of gangs and cults. It is the same. They prey on young impressionable adolescents and exploit them".

I breathed a sigh of relief!

Next visit on the list was to meet Muhammad Robert Heft, of the [Paradise For Ever](#) at his Centre on Nugget Ave., Toronto. Chris told me how Robert has been her mentor and a dear friend because he was there for her when she was desperately looking for answers as to what could have made her son go to Syria.. She contacted him at 1:00 a.m. from Calgary one morning - within 10 minutes he responded. Since then, they have become good friends. After her talk with the group, it was time for Questions and Answers. Someone asked how many Muslim organizations were there for her when she needed help. Chris said there was very good support from the Calgary Mosques, Imams and the community.

It is now Saturday, November 29th and time for the big seminar at IIT - the place that made her visit to Toronto possible. Other Imams and Muslim leaders were invited to the seminar to discuss "Extremism and Radicalization in Canada -- *We cannot stand idle*

*while our faith is being hijacked"*. The panel of experts included Imam (Dr.) Hamid Slimi of the [Syeda Khadija Centre](#), Sr. Shahina Siddiqui of [ISSA Manitoba](#), [Shaikh Abdool Hamid](#) of [IIT](#), Sr. Khadija Kanji of [Noor Cultural Centre](#), Dr. Abdullah Hakim Quick, [Islamic Scholar](#), Sr. Ginella Massa of [CTV News Channel](#), and of course, Br. Mohamed Khadim of [IIT](#). Sr. Sheema Khan, monthly columnist for the [Globe and Mail](#) sent her regrets from Ottawa.

More good news for Chris: [Muhammad Robert Heft](#), the de-radicalization specialist from [P4E](#), who also works with the Canadian authorities, presented a cheque for \$1,000 from his organization to the Hayat Canada Foundation which Chris has founded. Mr. Faisal Kutty of [KSM Law Firm](#) also pledged to help incorporate this foundation into a not-for-profit NGO. All for *gratis*! Thank you Toronto and thank you IIT for organizing and making this seminar a reality. We often hear people asking what are Muslims doing about de-radicalization?

The seminar was an overwhelming success. There was not a dry eye in the room as Chris told her story. People who stood in line to ask questions had to return to their seats as they ran out of time. Officials of IIT and the audience agreed to continue this conversation at future Town Hall meetings.

Chris was overwhelmed by the number of hugs, words of encouragement and friends she made here. So many people wanted to keep in touch with her. Chris has started a Canadian branch of Hayat Family Support Foundation Canada. Hayat means "life" and is originally a German group that was established to help families intervene and stop radicalization. "I can't let Damian die just in vain" – this was Chris' motivation behind this initiative.

CTV found out that Chris was in Toronto and they, too, wanted an interview. I asked her if she ever got tired of going from place to place, and of telling her story about Damian. I must have seen her cry over a dozen times during that weekend. Her reply was, "If I can save even one kid from getting killed by extremists, then it would have been worth it".

Christianne is Catholic by faith. She is a very simple, loving, and down-to-earth mother. I listened to the way she spoke to her other younger children and husband back in Calgary. I was surprised at how much she has learned about Islam. We talked about

how Islam teaches kindness, justice, peace and caring -- but like all religions, there is always the fringe element that becomes the focus of the media.

When asked what she is hoping to get out of this visit to Toronto, Chris said she is also trying to raise awareness that the Canadian Government needs to pay attention to the families of victims. She said authorities were mostly concerned about getting information, but with little regard to her family's emotional well being.

Christianne told me there were other issues in her already complicated life. Recently she had tried applying for a better paying job in Calgary. Prospective employers now check the Internet and social media before they hire. There is always an excuse why she is not invited for an interview. When they realise that she is Damion Clairmont's mother, she is instantly – and unfairly - categorized as the "Jihadi Mother". She even showed me her Twitter account that had some unsavoury remarks.

If only more people could spend a day with her like I did!