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Images via The Square, Omar, Captain Phillips

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by Suhad (Sue) Obeidi
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Changing the narrative of Muslims in Hollywood

by Suhad (Sue) Obeidi

Growing up Muslim with an interest in the entertainment business, I would often be envious of the Judeo-Christian communities and their impact on others through the medium of television, film and music and I wanted the same for my community. I have always been in awe of how Hollywood recognizes its own during a parade of galas that make up the award season and have also wished that one day Muslims would be recognized for their contributions in Hollywood.

I grew up in a suburb of Los Angeles, and the three things that were most important to me were my faith, being the best daughter to my parents, and keeping up with the latest movie releases in Hollywood and the industry's news. In my mind, the first two were consistent with each other, but the last one not so much. To me, the entertainment business was fast and hardcore. I nonetheless wanted in, but didn't know what that would look like for me. So for the longest time, I remained on the outside, looking in.



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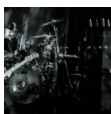
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As the years moved on, my desire to work in the industry became more about working behind the scenes to help influence Hollywood to tell more inspiring stories about my faith and its followers.

I wanted to help more accurately represent our community by promoting greater understanding by and of others. To be “tolerated” wasn’t going to be enough for me. The word tolerance sometimes reminds me of a hospital chart that gauges the level of pain that a patient feels. For Islam and Muslims, I wanted acceptance and respect.

For over 13 years, I have been working for the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). Our Hollywood Bureau serves as a bridge between the Muslim community and the entertainment industry, and it focuses on the following initiatives: Fostering relationships with industry professionals, consulting on film & TV projects, and holding networking events to create opportunities for industry insiders to interact with Muslim filmmakers.

We honor voices of courage and conscience by acknowledging professionals in entertainment whose work offers humanizing and multi-dimensional portrayals of Islam and Muslims. Our annual Media Awards gala recognizes actors, artists, and activists for their artistic contributions in promoting diversity and mutual understanding. For example, we have recently celebrated such projects as *Kinyarwanda*, a powerful film that highlighted the role of Muslim leaders in creating a safe haven during the Rwandan genocide, CW’s *Aliens in America* and Fox’s *Bones* for which both featured recurring Muslim characters in a humanizing light.

Each year when the Oscar nominees are announced, I climb out of bed early to hear the artists and projects announced. This year it gave me chills to hear that a record number of Muslims were nominated in major categories including Best Documentary Feature: *The Square*; Best Foreign Language Film: *Omar*; and Best Supporting Actor: *Captain Phillips*.

For those in our community who have dreams of pursuing a career in the entertainment industry, this change has been a long time coming, and signals that if one has talent and perseverance, then one has a chance for success.

I am no longer envious of other communities because I am now aware of a different reality — that if Muslims want to see a better world for themselves and others, this is the industry we need to be contributing to. We need to change the narrative in Hollywood by telling our own stories — whether it is writing a screenplay that captures what it felt like to grow up as an American Muslim, or directing a film of social importance, or acting in a television drama that brings awareness to a particular issue — we must understand the power of storytelling and how it impacts others.

And so this is what it looks like for me — while I am technically still not “in” the industry, I am also not on the outside looking in anymore. My organization and my community are charting a new direction for Hollywood by changing the narrative, and I am contributing in my own way. There will still be projects that don’t represent us in a positive or accurate light, but as more and more Muslims contribute to the industry, there will be a shift in storylines and storytelling.

This year’s Oscar nominations mark a milestone for Muslims: we not only have cracked the door to Hollywood open, we have entered the arena. What happens next is up to us. Now I am looking to my brothers and sisters in faith to do their thing, and be ready for their acceptance speeches.



About **Suhad (Sue) Obeidi**

Suhad (Sue) Obeidi is the Director of Operations and Head of the Hollywood Bureau at the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC). "The Sound of Music" is the first film she has ever seen and it remains her favorite. In fact, she traveled to Salzburg, Austria once just to visit the Von Trapp family home and other film locations. Her secret crush is Michael J. Fox -- she loved him as Alex P. Keaton and loves him even more now. Sue also dabbles in **voice acting**. Please follow on Twitter: [@suhadwhat](https://twitter.com/suhadwhat)

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