

Peeling back prejudice



Life in America a struggle for many post-9/11

BY CRYSTAL PERSON-TILLMAN

Louise A. Cainkar '76 was just a five-year-old child when she began noticing the disparity between poverty stricken pockets of downtown Chicago and her family's affluent neighborhood in Evergreen Park. The stark contrast troubled her so much, she remained attuned to such inequities as she grew older.

Her awareness of social injustices increased as she studied in the Department of Criminal Justice Sciences at Illinois State. She went on to complete graduate work in sociology, all the while becoming increasingly steeped in the struggle for global human rights. Now a faculty member in the Department of Social and Cultural Sciences at Marquette University in Milwaukee, Cainkar is a national expert in Arab and Muslim American studies.

"I have always studied people who have been silenced. The thread of everything I do is trying to give the voiceless a voice," said Cainkar, who began researching Arab and Muslim Americans nearly three decades ago. Her work took on

new meaning after the terrorist attacks in September of 2001. "Suddenly my area of specialty was considered important."

Cainkar set aside seven years to research, analyze data, and publish her findings on the question of "what it means to be an Arab or a Muslim in a country set on edge by the worst terrorist attack in its history." Her examination of the topic and activism have led to coverage by major media, including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Sun-Times*; an invitation to speak at Harvard University; guest spots on radio and talk shows; and opportunities to offer an analysis on breaking news, such as the tragic shooting at Fort Hood last fall. The military suspect is a U.S. citizen of Jordanian descent, whose religious beliefs quickly became a talking point in media reports. Such a response points to underlying suspicions and hostilities that Cainkar asserts were festering long before 9/11.

"A lot of people think the prejudice started on September 11. In fact the idea that these people were somehow different from everyone else existed before September 11. Those ideas