

## I am an American We are One Nation

# LIGHTING A CANDLE IN THE DARKNESS

Abdul’Haq Muhammed helps low-income children in Florida neighborhoods lead better lives

**TOM HAYDEN**

USA TODAY NETWORK

*As Americans, we are a diverse population. Historically, we have embraced that diversity as what brings us together and truly makes us one nation encouraging all to seek life, liberty and happiness. By sharing our individual differences and finding commonalities, we can work to unify the nation. One thing unites us: We are all Americans. Each week, this series will introduce you to an exceptional American who is making a difference to unite, rather than divide, our communities.*

He is from Harlem. He is a devout Muslim. To the children in some of the crime-torn and poverty-stricken neighborhoods in Fort Myers, Florida, Abdul’Haq Muhammed is a life saver.

### Abdul’Haq Muhammed

**Location:** Fort Myers, Fla. **Age:** 68 **Profession:** Founder and executive director of the Quality Life Center of Southwest Florida

**Mission:** To educate, develop and enhance the futures of children coming from low-income and crime-ridden neighborhoods

He also is tough, principled, generous with his time and his heart, a leader and difference maker for a community, where he helps kids each day build better lives and become difference makers themselves. He has seen his share of crime, from drug deals to shootings, and stopped some of it himself. Still, he hangs on to this: “Don’t curse the darkness, light a candle,” he said.

Muhammed, 68, is the founder and executive director of the Quality Life Center of Southwest Florida, located in Fort Myers. The children there consider him a mentor. He has been their answer to a journey from tough streets to learning discipline and respect, becoming educated, going to college and helping others as well.

His vision, after leaving the Army in 1969, was to build children’s programs. He founded the Woodycrest Center for Human Development in the Bronx, New York. He ran the programs on the faith that people would help make repairs on an aging building and invest in children. That money never arrived the way he thought it should.

“I was idealistic,” he said. “I was promised I would get the money by doing work in the community. ... I decided ... to get the money.”

He left New York and then Fort Myers to make his fortune from international trade and real estate.

But every time he turned on the television, he saw the same, unforgettable image: African-American teenage boys arrested, handcuffed and pushed into the back of police cars. “It played over and over again in my mind, boys on the ground, arrested, up against a wall,” Muhammed said. He was encouraged by a friend, who remembered his work in New York, to do the same thing in Fort Myers, specifically a smaller community within the city, called Dunbar. The area has been an epicenter for violence, including many of the record 24 murders in the city in 2012.

He quickly began attracting children — eight at first — using martial arts as the motivation.

Today, his work has helped thousands of children and 120 are involved in programs at the Quality Life Center, including martial arts, dance, drama, fine arts and technology.

“He has been a great, influencing voice,” said Angel Escobar, 18, of Fort Myers, who grew up at the center, is a recent high school graduate and now is teaching children there. “He keeps that voice in my head, telling me ‘you can do it.’ ”

Nominate an American

Who are your American heroes? Share stories and nominees at [onenation.usatoday.com](http://onenation.usatoday.com), via email to [onenation@usatoday.com](mailto:onenation@usatoday.com) or post a video submission to Twitter, Facebook or Instagram (no longer than 2 minutes, please) with the hashtags #IAmAnAmerican #WeAreOneNation.

*Originally from Harlem, New York, Abdul’Haq Muhammed served in the Army, attended college, and worked in South and North Africa importing and exporting clothes before settling in Fort Myers in 1990 and starting the QLC. **What does it mean to be an American?***

“I am a veteran. I grew up in this country. I served in this country during the Vietnam era. I consider myself a patriot. That doesn’t mean I agree with all of the policies our country has. Every day I wake up making a contribution to our community, to our society, to make a better way and better place for young people and adults. To me, that is patriotism.” **What moment touched and motivated you to launch this effort?** “The spark for me was to see teenagers and African-American and Latino boys being arrested, their heads being guided into police cruisers. That sticks with me very clearly. Looking at that, I felt there was something I could do. I was encouraged to come to the community and shortly after started Quality Life Center of Southwest Florida. In working now 26 years with Quality Life Center, where we have renovated a house of ill repute, a drug den, an after-hours spot where deaths have taken place, we have been blessed with the good efforts of many people in Lee County/Fort Myers to restore a facility. Now it is a beacon of hope. Children have been educated and went off to college. Now, their children are coming back for us to serve in early learning and after-school programs. This is an institution the community has embraced.”

## What gives you hope?

“What gives me hope is faith in the Creator. What gives me hope is the sense of opportunity that exists despite how bad it may seem. There is always opportunity. I believe in the philosophy: I think we can be motivated in different directions, and I choose to be motivated by opportunity.” **What do you hope to accomplish through your efforts?** “A big achievement is to help citizenry of Lee County/Fort Myers to better understand their neighbor. I think if we can understand our neighbor, regardless of what social economic level we are on, to be able to have genuine empathy that results in tangible and real results. Not throwing crumbs at the rich man’s gate, but genuinely recognize that I am my brother’s keeper, and let me do what I can to balance out society and give opportunity to people who didn’t have hope before.”



**Abdul'Haq Muhammed founded Quality Life Center and designed programs to enhance character development and combat violence.**

ANDREA MELENDEZ/USA TODAY NETWORK

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