



SARA RUBINSTEIN '98

Fatimah Hussein and Jamie Glover '06

READY to PLAY

Recognizing a void in the marketplace, Jamie Glover '06 and Fatimah Hussein founded ASIYA Sport, a company that manufactures modest sportswear for Muslim athletes. BY THOMAS ROZWADOWSKI

Sitting on a park bench in the Cedar-Riverside neighborhood of Minneapolis, Jamie Lykken Glover '06 and Fatimah Hussein watch as a group of boys play basketball on the court behind them. The boys are outside tonight for a reason. The indoor gym is reserved for GIRLS—Girls Initiative in Recreation and Leisurely Sports, a nonprofit program founded by Hussein and held at the Brian Coyle Community Center, the heart of neighborhood youth activity.

Hussein, a Twin Cities social worker who has volunteered in Cedar-Riverside since she was a teenager, started girls-only open-gym nights a decade ago to encourage Muslim girls to embrace physical fitness. Inside the center, a handful of young athletes practice free throws and dribbling with a female volunteer. During the drills, a middle-school girl unexpectedly grabs the ball and runs away from the group to play keep-away. It's exactly what you'd expect from kids who are whiling away evening hours on a basketball court.

Yet Muslim girls are often forced to choose between abiding by their religion's tenets and participating in sports, Hussein says. Without adult female role models and chaperones, they're often shut out of male-dominated athletic spaces.

"A lot of girls in our community want to try new things, but they aren't confident," says Hussein, whose family emigrated

from Somalia to Minneapolis when she was seven. "When they're constantly told they shouldn't be doing something boys are able to do, they get intimidated."

Hussein wanted to combat the young girls' feelings of inadequacy and intimidation. Step one: she found space in the neighborhood for girls to play on their own. Step two: she had to find clothing that would allow them the freedom to play, starting with a redesigned hijab—the traditional head covering worn by Muslim women in public. At that time, there was no such athletic apparel on the market, so Hussein enlisted the help of GIRLS participants to design culturally appropriate uniforms that allowed them to play comfortably. Step three: she staged a fashion show to introduce the new athletic wear, and received raves and offers of support from local business and political communities—and the University of Minnesota.

About the same time, Jamie Glover was feeling restless. An economics major at Carleton, Glover had worked in marketing and was looking for a new challenge, something more civic-minded than her corporate job allowed. She decided to pursue an MBA at the University of Minnesota with support from Carleton's Lofgren Alumni Business Fellowship, which helps midcareer alumni earn advanced



ASIYA sportswear is designed for modesty and practicality. Hijabs stay in place without pins, yet allow for movement. The sweat-wicking fabric helps athletes stay cool.

degrees so they can expand their business perspectives and prospects. She'd heard about Hussein's Kickstarter campaign through friend Chris Ghery '03, and when she found out that the MBA program was seeking someone to craft a business plan for selling activewear for Muslim girls, she decided it was more than a coincidence.

"How can I pursue doing good? I already had that framework going into business school," Glover says, "and the first time Fatimah's idea came up, I remember thinking how it was exactly the kind of thing I wanted to do. Then the idea came up again, but this time it was an opportunity to help drive it forward. It was also built around sports, which have always been part of my life."

A three-sport star at Edina (Minnesota) High School, Glover played volleyball at Carleton and racked up every honor possible, including All-America Honorable Mention during her senior year. When she joined the workforce, Glover noticed that managers praised her for the same qualities that made her a volleyball standout: she knew how to motivate others, exuded confidence, and never gave up.

"Sports instilled the skills that made me successful at Carleton and in my career," Glover says. "Girls being deprived of athletic experiences because of an issue like clothing didn't seem right to me."

Glover and Hussein joined forces and started off strong. At the university-sponsored Minnesota Cup competition for emerging businesses, Glover and Hussein nabbed several honors: best in the social entrepreneur division, top women-led business, and top minority-led business. The prize money helped them order fabric (they tested 80 kinds) and build their Kickstarter campaign, which eventually netted \$38,000: \$13,000 more than their goal.

The duo officially launched ASIYA in March. Named after an Islamic woman known for advancing justice, ASIYA (*ah-see-yah*) markets three styles of sport hijabs—Fit (facing page), longer with chest coverage; Lite, swim cap-style; and Sport (above), which most resembles a traditional hijab. Each pull-on garment uses trademark sweat-wicking, cool technology with a polyester-spandex mix. It's also safe for play: neither too flowy nor too restrictive, and no pins.

Glover says their dream is for schools, sports leagues, and park and recreation departments to view the hijab as necessary sports equipment. Deering High School in Portland, Maine, made national headlines in June by using private donations to purchase sport hijabs to outfit its female athletic teams: ASIYA's first high school client. According to the Associated Press, Deering is believed to be the first U.S. high school to provide hijabs to Muslim athletes; more commonly, students must supply their own headscarves. ASIYA also produces hijabs for universities to sell alongside school-branded sweatshirts and other apparel. The University of Minnesota is the first partner for what Glover is calling "spirit hijabs."

"Schools with a large population of Muslim girls often wonder why they don't play sports. Well, let's think about that," Glover says. "We're at an interesting moment in history. A lot of people are embracing the benefits of inclusion, and we offer a tangible, visible product that allows people to say, 'Yes, we want everyone to be part of our programs.'"

In spring 2018 Nike will launch Pro Hijab, its line of sport hijabs. While that may seem like daunting competition, Glover isn't worried. Instead, she views Nike's entry into the market as a means to more visibility for ASIYA. Indeed, after Nike's announcement, ASIYA's website saw a huge traffic spike, an indication that there's room for several players, both large and small.

In addition, ASIYA is already selling its products and garnering attention. The *New York Times*, *People*, and Oprah Winfrey's magazine have requested interviews. The initial wave of publicity has kept ASIYA busy, yet Glover knows the feel-good element of empowering young Muslim women

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won't be enough to sustain them over time. That's where the juggling act gets particularly challenging. Both Glover and Hussein have young children at home, and with Hussein working her own job and coaching at the community center, the pair relies heavily on "windshield time," Glover says. The car becomes their boardroom. While they drive together to meetings or to visit a local manufacturer, Glover and Hussein need to catch up on the numbers, fast.

"There are only two of us, and only so many hours in the day. We're rarely in the same space," says Glover, who does most of ASIYA's business from her home. "But Fatimah and I are figuring it out."

Glover is quick to credit Hussein for connecting with Minneapolis's Somali and other East African communities. She has facilitated meetings with parents, elders, and other cultural leaders whose support is essential as the company seeks to move beyond its Cedar-Riverside roots. ASIYA isn't just about changing hijabs locally, says Glover. It's about changing minds globally.

"Parents have become advocates for their daughters. They've seen the change in their girls. They think it's important, too," Hussein says. "But a larger conversation has to happen for this to have a bigger impact, and that's what fuels us. We want to make sure that Muslim girls around the country—and around the world—have access to experiences that build their confidence and make them stronger." ♡

