

Fallout from controversial photo threatens Verdun daycare ^[1]

Author: CBC News

Source: CBC News

Format: Article

Publication Date: 27 Nov 2013

EXCERPTS:

One photo changed everything for the owners of a Verdun daycare.

Sam and Julie, whose names have been changed to protect their identities, say their business and livelihood are in jeopardy after a photo of two of the daycare's educators, clad in niqabs, were circulated online.

The parents of one child who attended the daycare have since decided to take their business elsewhere because they feel uneasy about the possibility of the daycare being a target.

"You never know what's going to happen, and as a parent, when you send your child somewhere, one of the main things you're looking for is safety, and we had that," says Julie.

"But now everyone is concerned."

Sam, her husband, says he thinks their concerns are justified. The location of the daycare has now been disclosed, and it opens them up to the possibility of racially motivated attacks.

"Even if it's the slightest concern for them... As a parent, they [my children] are the most beloved things in my life, and I imagine it's the same for the parents," Sam says. "They wouldn't want to risk it."

Now Sam and Julie are concerned other parents will follow suit and take their children out of the daycare.

Niqab a personal choice

Three people at Julie and Sam's daycare wear the niqab - but only in the presence of adult men and when they go outside.

Julie was born and raised in Quebec and says she decided to wear the niqab on her own, much to the disagreement of her parents. Her father, a Muslim, and her mother, a Christian, were both non-practicing and didn't understand their daughter's interest in wearing the niqab.

Julie respected their opinions and decided she would wait until she married and moved out to wear the niqab.

She confronted Sam with her desire to wear the niqab and asked if he would accept it. He said it didn't matter to him either way.

"I made an educated decision to wear it after doing some research and it's my own choice. I do not want to take it off," Julie says.

Owners fear PQ will make an example of them

Quebec's proposed secular charter, as it stands, is only concerned with \$7-a-day daycares and makes no provisions for what people can wear inside private daycares.

The day after the photo of six preschool-aged children and two educators in niqabs was circulated online, Sam and Julie's daycare was visited by government inspectors.

They fear the Parti Québécois government may try to make an example of them to promote the application of its secular charter.

Julie says she wouldn't be surprised if they rewrote the charter to include private daycares as a result.

The couple says that the controversy surrounding them has made them feel like pariahs.

"Living in the Middle East as a Palestinian, I never really belonged anywhere. I came here, I've lived here since '97, I have my citizenship, and one of the things that made me feel good about being here is that I felt that I was just as equal as everybody," Sam says.

Julie says that, although she's a born-and-bred Quebecer, she no longer feels welcome here.

"I struggle with two parts, because I was born and raised here and I've always felt very safe. Even before the charter, when I would walk and people would look at me, if I was walking with my sister, she's the one who would notice. It doesn't phase me, it doesn't bother me," she says

"But now, the other part is struggling because, more and more, I'm starting to feel like... a second-class citizen. I don't feel like people believe I should belong here, and I've always felt like I belong."

-reprinted from CBC News

Region: Quebec [2]

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