

Islam is a faith but it manifests itself in every aspect of your life

new muslim , convert to islam , reborn , Sister Roshni

Sister Roshni is used to the reaction of cab drivers who pick her up at work.

Typically they will say: "You cannae be a Muslim, you're white."

But as a blind woman and a convert to Islam, Roshni is used to breaking down stereotypes.

She said: "I have a visual impairment, which means I've had so much stick for all kinds of other reasons, so you learn to counteract that and use it in a positive way.

"I tell them about myself, that I have halal turkey with my Christian parents at Christmas. I connect with them in a human way. Muslims have been demonised and talking to each other is the best way to counter that."

Roshni was once Ruth Forrest, from East Kilbride, who went to Sunday school at her Baptist church.

Now aged 26, she is the winner of the Young Scottish Muslim of the Year Award and is devoted to Islam.

The 2008 awards will take place on October 30 at Celtic Park and they aim to highlight the good young Muslims are doing every day in Scotland.

And, as winners such as Roshni demonstrate, there is no typical Muslim. Roshni had been brought up a Christian, but never felt that was enough for her.

Her interest in Islam grew when she tuned in to Radio Ramadhan, a community station in Glasgow.

She said: "There were a lot of people on there who had converted. I

found a realness in Islam that had been missing for me in Christianity.

“I used to go to the station and just chill with them. I was so impressed with the people I was meeting. They had a vibrancy. I felt welcomed for who I was.”

Roshni has been blind since birth but was brought up to never allow her disability to hold her back.

She said: “I grew up in a family where the attitude was, ‘OK you might not be an aircraft pilot, but you can do anything else?’.”

They didn’t expect that one of those things would be for her to convert to Islam.

She said: “It was difficult for my family at first. Initially it was fear of the unknown. I was only 15 and a lot of what they knew about Islam had been clouded by the stereotypes.

“They were fearful of what I was getting into. I think they felt that they had failed me because they saw it as a rejection of Christianity in favour of Islam.”

They were particularly shocked when she walked in one day wearing a scarf. She said: “It was awful for them. I realised the scarf was going to be a major barrier so I didn’t wear one for a long time.”

Now she finds the hijab liberating, especially as a blind woman.

“I don’t always know how I look or how others look at me. When I go out and I am wearing the scarf, my physical presence is no longer the issue. I can get on with just being who I am.”

Her parents have now accepted her conversion, but it has taken time.

She said: “I am touched and proud of how they’ve adapted and given me the space to be what I want to be. It might not be ideal for them but they accept it.

“Islam is a faith but it manifests itself in every aspect of your life. How you eat, how you dress and how you live your life, so it was a lot for them to get their heads around.”

Roshni followed her dream of working in radio. After training with the BBC she worked as a researcher for Radio Scotland and became a senior producer. She then went to work in Pakistan for three years for an Urdu-speaking radio station.

Roshni said: “I taught myself the language through friends and the media. At first it was a novelty to have this blind, white, Urdu-speaking woman who happened to be a Muslim working with them.

“But I was amazed at how quickly they warmed to me. Even now I really miss Pakistan.”

Now Roshni is the Scotland representative of Transatlantic 2020, an international initiative designed to build relations between the US and Europe post 9/11 and 7/7.

She also works for Inclusion Scotland and Glasgow Equalities partnership, breaking down barriers for Muslims and the disabled.

She was nominated last year for Young Scottish Muslim of the Year by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers.

Roshni said: “To win was such an honour and I think it breaks down stereotypes. It shows that Muslims come from everywhere. They are of all colours and nationalities.”

The Young Scottish Muslim of the Year Awards 2008 will be hosted by comedian Jonathan Watson, with guests of honour First Minister Alex Salmond and Gordon Smith, the Scottish Football Association chief executive. The awards go to young people as voted by their peers.