

ORANGE COUNTY DAD DOESN'T LET INJURY DERAILED JOURNEY

# A Father's Day to celebrate faith, family and 'a miracle'

BY CATHY DYSON  
THE FREE LANCE-STAR

With his wife and nine children, Omari Grey was working toward his dream of being "a Black family of 11 that is homeschooling, homesteading and homebuilding" in rural Orange County.

There were obstacles, of course, and when Grey put his thoughts on video four years ago, he focused on what seemed like big challenges at the time. A New York native who'd never gone camping until his children became Boy Scouts, he and his wife, Sakinah McDowell, were figuring out how to live off the land—and his teaching salary.

They also were helping their four sons and five daughters become self-sufficient, independent thinkers who could master schoolwork and household chores, unpredictable animals and equipment breakdowns.

And, they tried to fit in—in a rural area where they stood out because of their family size and religion. The couple converted to Islam in college, before their marriage 20 years ago. They'd lived among people with different faiths and backgrounds in Northern Virginia and abroad and noticed that diversity didn't seem to exist in the Gordonsville area of Orange they moved to in 2017.

Instead, one angry man at a public meeting in central Virginia accused every Muslim of being a terrorist. Grey included a clip of that moment in his YouTube video, "Journey to Homestead."

Even so, the family persevered and began to bond with those around them. McDowell made friends in a women's flag football

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PHOTOS BY PETER CIHELKA / THE FREE LANCE-STAR

Muhammed Grey, 18, helps his father, Omari, through a physical therapy session at the family's Orange County home. Omari Grey was seriously injured in an automobile accident last June.



Yusef Grey, 16, continues work on a shelter for the family's goats at their Gordonsville farm.



Sisters Layla Grey (left), 11, and 9-year-old Zaynab prepare breakfast for their family.

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It was a miracle.

—YUSEF GREY, 16, ON HIS FATHER'S RECOVERY FROM LIFE-THREATENING INJURIES SUFFERED IN AN AUTOMOBILE CRASH LAST JUNE

## FATHER

► FROM A1

league at the Fredericksburg Field House, as well as with neighbors and those she met at local farm and building supply stores.

Grey had always been a big believer in “community” and that one person has the ability to make a difference. He’s done just that as a math teacher, basketball coach and personal trainer, preferring to work with inner-city kids because he said they needed him the most.

The community that was so important to the family of 11, along with their core values and beliefs, came into play when an accident threatened every aspect of their lives.

Grey was driving home on June 17, 2020, after delivering chickens to a buyer in Washington and visiting a friend. He doesn’t remember what happened, but his wife guesses he fell asleep at the wheel during the early morning hours. His van crossed the center line of State Route 20 and crashed head-on into a tractor-trailer.

In the 24 hours that followed, doctors told her he was gone, that no brain activity remained and that if he stayed on life support, he would be in a “persistent, vegetative state.” Physicians sought permission to harvest his organs, to take him off machines that kept him alive.

McDowell said their religion wouldn’t allow the organ donation, but she did agree to remove him from life support.

Somehow, Grey kept on breathing.

A year later, as his children see glimpses of their father’s personality returning—or watch him lean on his walker and practice his paces from the living room to the kitchen—they believe he’s alive because of divine intervention.

“On the day of his accident, so many people prayed for him. Thousands of people prayed for him on a Zoom call,” said Yusef, 16, the second-oldest. “We believe that’s why he’s with us now. It was a miracle.”

### ‘DON’T DO GENDER ROLES’

Grey and McDowell, both 43, have always combined traditional values with not-so-traditional routines.

They believe in home-birthing and homeschooling, yet McDowell kept her maiden name when she married. Playing flag football is how she prefers to spend her happy, independent time. She played tackle football on her high school team in Japan, where she went to an American school for the children of service members.

Her mother was an Army drill sergeant, her father, a command sergeant major.

McDowell is the carpenter of the family, aided by Yusef. She built chicken pens called tractors that are moved daily so the birds get access to fresh grass and bugs, and he is working on a new goat building.

“My husband doesn’t know the difference between a hammer and a screwdriver,” she said, laughing. “We don’t do gender



Sakinah McDowell and her husband, Omari Grey, moved from Northern Virginia to Orange County in 2017 to pursue their dream of homesteading, homeschooling and homebuilding.

roles because we are Muslim and American. We do our own little thing.”

Grey always read bedtime stories at night, tucked in the children and styled the girls’ hair. As a teacher and the son of two instructors, he stresses positive reinforcement.

Or, as his wife puts it, “When the kids do something wrong, he does a lot of talking.”

She’s seen their different parenting styles through fresh eyes in the last year.

“Everything just makes sense, his personality and my personality were meant to be,” she said. “I used to complain, ‘You’re too soft with the kids.’ Now I honestly believe, it is no problem for his children to take care of him with no complaints.”

Muhammed, 18, is the oldest and helps with his father’s physical therapy at home. He also just finished his first year at the University of Virginia and is in charge of slaughtering the chickens sold through the family’s operation, Fitrah Farms. It focuses on naturally raised and organic halal chicken, processed according to Islamic law.

### ‘BACK TO HIMSELF’

Grey spent more than four months in the hospital and a rehabilitation facility. During the early days at a Richmond facility, McDowell challenged medical officials who suggested her husband’s condition would never improve.

“They thought she was crazy,” Grey said last week.

He’s got lingering physical issues from being bedridden for so long without any movement. He’s also recovering from the brain injury suffered in the collision and sometimes doesn’t remember the sequence of events.

But when he chimes in with



Abbas Grey, 13, tends to the family’s bees. He says seeing his father in the hospital was ‘the shocking-est moment’ of his life.

a comment like the one about the impression his wife made on medical people, there’s a gleam in his eye and a grin on his face. His family revels in those moments.

Likewise, McDowell proclaims “Mashallah,” which literally means “what God has willed” when her husband walks around the house—or when he surprised them all recently and made his way down the basement stairs and into the barn area.

“I feel like Daddy’s getting back to himself,” Muhammad said. “Each day, he’s accomplishing more, I can see that.”

“I feel like a year from now or even sooner, he’s going to be back to normal,” Yusef said.

Perhaps Abbas, who’s 13 but proudly declares he’ll be 14 in August, summed up what it was like for his family to see their father after the accident. He stood by his hospital bed, looking at the unconscious form of the man who’d always had a

kind word of encouragement or praise for him and his siblings, who wanted to teach them the intangible lessons of life while their mother focused on the tangible ones like swinging a hammer.

“That was the shocking-est moment of my entire life,” he said. “I couldn’t even express my feelings.”

### VALUE OF COMMUNITY

The four oldest, all young men in their teens, often talked at the same time as they explained their responsibilities. They also were courteous and polite, as were their younger sisters, even though some are a little shyer.

Adnan, 15, brought a folding chair to a reporter as the group gathered under trees near the chicken pens to talk. Inside, Layla, an 11-year-old who’s in charge of meals, made extra breakfast burritos—of spicy chicken, salsa and beans—for their guests.

McDowell says Layla, the old-

est of the five girls, is her “Mini-Me.” She’s clearly a mother hen to her younger siblings, who are 9, 7, 5 and 4, and the mother has taken away her cleaning duties because she knows Layla would do all the work herself instead of delegating.

“Do you play, do you even play?” the mother asked Layla after noting the girl had also put out a bowl of applesauce and sliced carrots.

“I don’t really like to play,” Layla said.

Little Sofia, 5, and Aya, 4, do, and when they got even slightly loud or left crayons on the floor of their classroom, older brothers hushed them or helped pick up the mess.

The home is amazingly clutter-free, considering all the people under its roof.

### ‘THANKED GOD’

As McDowell reflects on the past year, she’s amazed by so many things—and not just the miraculous recovery made by the father of her children. She thinks about the people who rallied around him, the “community” that he had established, both when they lived in the Middle East and during his years of reaching out to others.

She had no idea he had touched so many lives and that people were eager to return the favor. Some looked after the farm, others cared for the children. Three friends stayed nearby for months, taking her to the hospital daily and reminding her to eat or brush her teeth when she was so absorbed by her husband’s condition.

Others tapped into their large network of friends and family and found medical specialists who told McDowell her husband could recover, it would just take time.

Still others established a LaunchGood page that raised an amazing \$1.1 million for the family. A committee set up a trust fund that pays the family the monthly equivalent of Grey’s teaching salary. The rest of their income is from the farm.

On the fundraising page, Jazakullah Khair wrote that Grey is “a man who always put the community first. On any given day, you’ll find him teaching calculus; coaching youth basketball; helping the community with fitness training, or serving at-risk youth, and co-parenting his nine children.”

Sometimes, McDowell fussed at her husband for spending so much time with others when she and the children needed him at home. He told she needed to see the bigger picture, the value of being part of something larger than themselves, which he stressed again, just last week.

“A big focus for me has been the community,” he said, noticing that wherever he lived, “there’s always one person in the community who makes a difference.”

Grey’s tried to be that person to others and is more than grateful for the way others helped him and his family.

“I have thanked God for that,” he said.

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Sisters (from left) Fatima Grey, 7; Sofia, 5, and Aya, 4, do their schoolwork. The family’s four boys and five girls have all been homeschooled.



Adnan Grey, 15, moves chicken tractors at the family’s Fitrah Farms. It is his responsibility to care for the chickens, which are the prime product of the farm.