

US comic visits Bradford

Sarah backs appeal to buy Bronte book

By Yusef Alam

01274 705126
yusef.alam@newsquest.co.uk

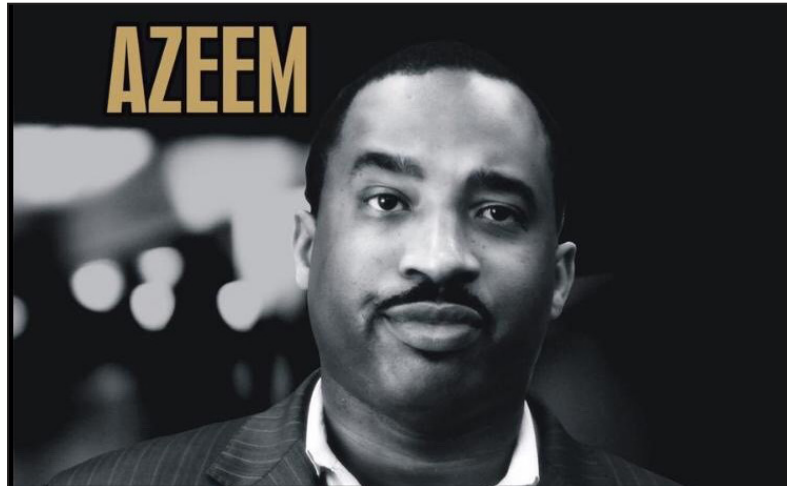
AN AMERICAN comedian produced a powerful performance in Bradford and left with positive impressions of the city.

Azeem Muhammad, from St Louis, Missouri, is performing across the UK as part of the Super Muslim Comedy Tour, organised by Penny Appeal, with all proceeds going to poor children in Senegal.

Azeem was one of several performers at the Bradford Hotel on Friday and engaged and interacted well with an audience who laughed long into the night.

Azeem, 46, first found a taste for comedy as a mental health support worker: "I was always serious at work, but the clients just found me naturally funny." After attending an open mic night, Azeem, "20 years later", he says, has performed across the world.

He performed in Bradford last year as part of the same tour and said: "Bradford feels very community-based. I saw so much diversity and the city has a collective of great people. There was an amazing turn-out tonight, it was just as packed as last year. The community in Bradford galvanises itself towards events like this and shows great support to Penny Appeal and other good causes."



Azeem Muhammad performed in Bradford on Friday. He can be followed on Twitter and Instagram with the handle @AzeemComedy

Azeem converted to Islam at the age of 17, to move away from the drug dealing and criminality in his area that many young people succumbed to.

"Islam is about finding common denominators with each other, as opposed to distancing ourselves. A lot of people join gangs to feel a sense of belonging and a positive sense of self-esteem that they previously lacked. But Islam can cure that illness of having a lack of self-love and

allows you to love others on a real, organic level. It can give kids like me, who got involved with the wrong crowd, a positive community and identity.

"Muslims are regular people. We talk about normal things like our kids and our jobs and things that are as unique as ripples in water. Negative perceptions of Islam come from our inability to do our due diligence - we need to get to know each other deeper than what the media says."

Azeem referenced grooming scandals that shook places such as Rotherham and Huddersfield in recent years. Many of the ringleaders were British-Pakistani and Muslim, which raised questions on race relations in the UK.

"As evil as grooming is, the people who did that weren't Muslim. You can't just be Muslim by name - it's based on your characteristics. If your actions don't line up with the moral principles of Islam, then you fall short of what it means to be Muslim", Azeem said.

"I can take the logo off my Nike trainers and put them on some Puma trainers," he explains in a comic tone, "But that doesn't make them Nike, it makes them counterfeit! Similarly, I see those people as counterfeit Muslims. People like those groomers diminish the reputation of Islam and the media then plays on the ignorance of the masses."

Azeem sees comedy as a vital outlet: "I'm a holistic healer through humour. Laughter creates dopamine in the brain and reduces stress and anxiety.

"I like to discuss serious issues, but deliver them comically. When people receive serious issues through laughter, it can help them to think about those issues deeper, through the persuasiveness of comedy - we should utilise humour in our communicational dialogue more often."



ACTOR Sarah Lancashire has lent her support to a campaign to bring home one of Charlotte Bronte's 'Little Books' - miniature childhood diaries.

Sarah (above), who played Nelly Dean in a 2009 TV adaptation of Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, visited the Bronte Parsonage Museum this month to find out about the campaign.

The museum, which already has most of the surviving Little Books, has launched a crowdfunding campaign to raise the expected £650,000 asking price when the book is auctioned in Paris this month.

Sarah said: "These little books are a unique insight into the 14-year-old Charlotte. The little book coming up for auction in Paris belongs here in Haworth and I ask everyone who can to support the campaign to bring it home."

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