

This Is My Illinois Story

When many people think of Illinois, they picture Chicago's towering skyline or the endless stretches of farmland that blanket the state. However, when I think of Illinois, I think of the warm aroma of biryani greeting me after school and the familiar sound of my athan clock reminding me that it is time for Asr prayer. These are not the images that appear on postcards or tourism brochures, yet they tell an important story about Illinois—a story of families who bring pieces of their heritage from around the world and weave them into the fabric of America. As a Pakistani American Muslim growing up in Illinois, I could never be more proud of my identity. It is what shapes who I am and influences the values I carry with me every day.

While growing up in Illinois, my identity as a Pakistani Muslim has been woven into my daily life and personality.

In Islam, we strongly believe in modesty. The way you talk, dress, and act should all reflect modesty and help you carry yourself with dignity. Balance is also important. Since we pray five times a day, some people may think it is difficult to balance religion and school. This is where balance becomes important. For example, during the month of Ramadan, we fast from dawn to dusk without food or drink. Once reaching the age of maturity, fasting and many other religious duties become obligatory. This means that I fast throughout the school day. During lunch periods, I often spend my time studying with a teacher or reading in the library. Along with that, we are also allowed to miss school for Eid prayers, where we dress in our newest and nicest clothes and gather with other members of the Muslim community. While my faith shapes many aspects of my daily life, my Pakistani heritage has also played an important role in who I am.

Some of my strongest connections to my Pakistani heritage can be found in the everyday moments of home, from the aroma of biryani in the kitchen to conversations with family members. Since I am Pakistani, I am bilingual in both English and Urdu. Because of this, I often speak a mix of both languages at home, which helps me stay connected to my heritage

while strengthening my fluency in both languages. Whenever my grandparents come to visit, we typically enjoy traditional Pakistani foods such as biryani, nihari, and naan, or some type of salan mixed with meat. We sit together, discuss the latest events and politics in Pakistan, and spend time as a family. These moments help me stay connected to my roots, even while growing up in Illinois.

At my school, there are not many Muslims or Pakistanis, which means I am often asked questions about my culture, faith, and traditions. My experiences have allowed me to share my culture with others, and those exchanges help create understanding between people from different backgrounds. Pakistani weddings are known for their vibrant colors, music, and celebrations, so my teachers often enjoy hearing about my trips to Pakistan or even to Springfield for a relative's wedding. Sometimes, when I bring biryani for lunch, my friends become interested in trying it and learning more about the food and traditions that are part of my culture. Through these conversations, I have learned that curiosity and understanding can bring people from different backgrounds together.

This state is made up of people from many different backgrounds, each bringing their own traditions, experiences, and stories that shape what Illinois truly is. For me, Illinois represents a place where I do not have to choose between my identities. I can be Pakistani, Muslim, and American all at once. The conversations I have at school, the traditions I practice at home, and the culture I share with others all come together to form my experience of life in Illinois.

Through these experiences, I have learned that the stories we carry from home do not remain separate from where we live; rather, they become part of the community itself. In this sense, Illinois is not only where my story takes place, but also where my story becomes part of something larger: the ongoing story of America.

From the aroma of biryani after school to the sound of my athan clock marking the rhythm of my day, I have learned that Illinois is not just where I live, but where my story becomes part of the larger story of America.