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With crossed legs, they rock back and forth to the melodic recitation that fills the air. One boy rests his hands on his head. His eyes reveal the concentration of grasping for verse after verse.

Mohammad Nahavandi, a guide on a personal journey to tackle a great feat of memory, paces back and forth with arms crossed and ears listening intently as a student sits by his desk

reciting. Nahvandi's eyes stray to his Qur'an from time to time, double-checking the words that have become second nature.

His students work towards reciting roughly 600 pages of Arabic text that millions look to for guidance.

In the Hifzh school, students of all different ages, use daily recitation to memorize the Qur'an, the holy book of Islam, from cover to cover. The program is part of the larger Dar-us-Salaam Muslim community in College Park, Md. The school is comprised of one class for females and two for males, with about 10 to 12 students per class. "During the day students are working on different aspects: They are memorizing what they learned that day, they are reviewing what they have learned in the past, they are reviewing what they memorized in the recent days so that they are able to transfer it from their short-term memory to their longer-term memory," said Haroon Baqai, director of the Hifzh school.

Unlike other religious texts, there are no different versions of the Qu'ran.

"The miraculous thing of the Qur'an is that it is preserved for 1,400 years, letter by letter, diacritic by diacritic, vowel by vowel, so you can't just ... explain it in your own words," Baqai said. "You can explain a verse, but you have to recite it exactly how it is written, without even a slight difference in how it is written."

Mohammad Nahavandi, a teacher at the Hifzh for four years, explained why Muslims stress the importance of exact recitation.

"We cannot alter the words of Allah, these are his words these are the rules and laws and everything is explained to us here," said Nahavandi. "If we change one letter it could change the meaning, if generation after generation starts changing words we could end up with an entirely different book."

In addition to the Qur'an in its original Arabic form, a copy of an English translation is also studied to provide meaning, Nahavandi said. The majority of students do not speak Arabic prior to starting the program.

In Islam, the English translation is not seen as an authentic version of the Qur'an, because it is felt that translation out of the rich Arabic vernacular causes loss of important meaning.

Some may ask how students find meaning in a text they cannot understand. Nahavandi said memorization includes a two-part process. Students first take a class once a week on the implications of certain verses, and secondly begin to go through word-by-word and translate the meaning. Eventually students start to build a vocabulary and have the ability to piece together some meaning.

Most students said the requirement to put into practice teachings from their studies into daily life is harder than the actual process of memorization.

Shaheed Twyman, 13, a student who recently completed the program, said this challenge often has to do with everyday habits that are hard to break.

"In the book it says do not backbite, like talk about people behind their back," Twyman said. "So I used to do that, but now I stopped because I understand what the teachings are saying."

The participation in the Hifzh is not an obligation for every Muslim. Therefore, it often is a large personal decision by either student or a student and their parents to enroll in the program. Musfika Hossain, 17, a third-year student, said she always wanted to be involved in Qur'an memorization, and her parents encouraged it.

"It has been a dream of mine ever since I was young to memorize the Qur'an," Hossain said. "I always thought finishing the Qur'an was a big accomplishment and duty in my life."

Since the normal school day in the Hifzh is spent working on their memorization, students must keep up with traditional academics through homeschooling.

Baqai said the students' general educational progress should not be slowed, if parents maintain discipline with homeschooling, including using the many school breaks to catch up on schoolwork.

"When you are memorizing 600 pages letter by letter, vowel by vowel, your brain has become so sharp you have made your brain so strong that you are able to go through other subjects very successfully," said Baqai. "When I was memorizing my grades definitely improved."

With completion of the program comes the transition back to traditional school. Fatima Khan, 12, has been enrolled in the Hifzh since she was 9. Khan said that once she finishes the program she would be entering a public school, the first time she will be educated in a secular institution.

"I want to go to college and I have to meet people who may not have the same beliefs," Khan said. "I shouldn't go there blind. I have to get used to people who are different so when I go to college I am prepared and not shocked."

In addition to continuing this education, Hayat Marso, 16, who has been studying the Qur'an for almost two years, said that one of the main reasons he was interested in the program was so that he could share his learning with others.

"Sometimes in the Metro, some people come and ask, 'Are you Muslim?' and I say, 'Yeah,' and they say, 'OK, tell me what Islam says,'" Marso said. "So I have to tell them, in memorizing the Qur'an it is my duty to teach and tell what Islam says."

While completion of the Qur'an is a miraculous feat, most students stressed that its memorization has greater purpose.

"There is a lot more you can do, this is just a small aspect. Some people make it out to be such

a big accomplishment but it is really the beginning of a lot more of what is to come," said Abrar Lohani, 20, a third year student in one of the male classes.

"You should never see it as the biggest thing. You shouldn't think of it as, OK, I have washed my hands and now I am done with it, there is always more to learn."