

Dear Honorable Judge Gershwin Drain,

I am writing to request leniency from you in the March 12 sentencing of Rasmea Odeh, whom I have know well since 2004, when she visited from Michigan and decided to stay in Illinois to help and support the community. My name is Halima Ahmad, and I am writing on behalf of the Arab Women's Committee (AWC) and all the women who know Rasmea in our community. I am now over 40 years old, and a single mother to 5 children after my husband passed away from a heart attack. When I first came to the U.S. over 20 years ago with my husband, I felt miserable and lonely; I didn't have family or friends. Everything around me was strange; the city, the people, the culture, and the language. I couldn't do anything for myself. Even when my first child was born, I couldn't take him to the doctor until my husband got home.

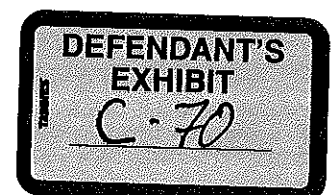
When I met Rasmea, everything in my life changed. She offered her support to help other women and me identify our needs. She provided support and assistance to help break our isolation, and to become independent, active members in the community and in society as a whole.

Ever since the Arab Women's Committee was created by Rasmea in 2004, it has provided us a safe environment and a family atmosphere that is based on understanding and respect. She is amazing, never tiring of giving us all her time, effort, and experience, so that we can become empowered as leaders, and meet our personal and community goals. She knows that strengthening women and mothers is the basis for strengthening the Arab American community in general.

On a personal level, I enrolled in English as a Second Language (ESL) and civics classes that the Arab American Action Network (AAAN) offered, which helped me to pass the citizenship exam. At the same time I participated in all the training and activities that Rasmea provided to us. The women built relationships with each other, and engaged in active and constructive discussions about U.S. society and how to communicate with people outside my community. These conversations led to the Arab Women's Writing Project, which trained 10 women in writing, reading, editing, and performance.

Rasmea has incredible charisma and strong leadership characteristics. She lives very modestly and devotes almost all her free time and energy to the AWC. Rasmea affects all members of the community positively. She is a lovely, kind, and empathetic person. She is a mother, sister, and daughter to all of us. We can't imagine how our lives would be without her and her support.

Rasmea gives me the foundation and confidence to go forward in my life, as she does for everyone that knows her. I learned how to drive, received my driver's license, graduated from ESL classes, and then enrolled in classes at Moraine Valley Community College.



Rasmea has impacted me as a student, mother, housewife, and woman participating in the broader community. The AWC created a bridge into society and opened up so many opportunities for myself and the other women. She changed my life and my understanding of what it means to be an active woman. I learned how to take care of my family, my community, and myself. I became encouraged and motivated to learn the skills to become a leader, which fulfills some of my goals and objectives.

All the women in the committee gain strength from one another; we share stories of our difficulties, pain, laughter, and transitions to American society. Through the workshops, we learned our rights as women and wives, how to build communities, and how to make sure that we are part of the decisions that affect our lives.

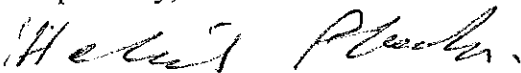
With Rasmea, I have been given "wings" to make myself be heard. I gained strength, and as a result, became a new person who cared so much for health issues, like breast cancer, heart disease, and emotional issues as well. In addition, I learned about the community and city, and how we have an important voice of change in society.

Rasmea has changed my life for the better. I have the full responsibility of five children, without a husband. I appreciate that Rasmea wasn't judgmental of me as a single mother. She wanted me to be strong and lead, and I did just that, connecting with other communities, such as the African American, Latino, and Asian ones, and helping to lead exchanges.

Please Judge Gershwin, grant leniency to Rasmea. If she loses her appeal, she will likely be stripped of her citizenship and deported, resulting in an elderly woman having to start her life over and permanently separate from family, friends, community, and us. This is devastating enough without compounding it with a prison term.

The members of the AWC believe that Rasmea has suffered enough, and we ask you to consider this when imposing your sentence.

Respectfully,



Halima Al-Rashdeh

February 12, 2015

