Sarah Shendy, BA ’06, has always been interested in why people do what they do. Born into a Muslim household, she lived in Egypt and Saudi Arabia before coming to the United States with her family in 1990, at age 6. Growing up in America, she noticed the difference between her structured, disciplined home life and the less restricted home life of most of her friends.

“Many Arab American families, especially those with young kids or teenagers, struggle because inside the home, it’s one world, and outside the home, it’s a whole different world,” says Shendy, who has dual US and Egyptian citizenship. “My siblings and I never attended a school dance or football game. When I was younger, my parents would say, ‘Don’t do this,’ and I wanted to know why. I wasn’t being defiant, I just wanted to know why we weren’t able to do certain things. And they never told us.

“Now, as a mature adult, I understand that my parents were trying to protect us, as most parents do. They were terrified of what would happen if we were out with people who had different values, ethics and morals. In many ways, I am grateful for being spared a lot of the unnecessary trouble and drama that some of my friends experienced because they just did whatever they wanted. However, in the Middle Eastern culture, we need to do better in terms of understanding others and communicating the reasons for living as we do.”

Enrolled at Kent State, Shendy wasn’t sure what she wanted to study—even though going into pre-med was strongly encouraged by her father. For her first two years, she majored in biology, but struggled with the electives. “I have to be a hundred percent engaged with and passionate about what I’m doing or it just doesn’t work,” she says.

Unhappy with her classes, it dawned on her that she had always been drawn to juvenile delinquents. “I felt that the majority of kids who were making bad decisions were doing so because they lacked structure, discipline and standards,” Shendy says. “Had they had love, support and proper leadership from someone who believed in them, they wouldn’t be like that. I wanted to help these kids become better, stronger human beings who can learn from adversity and do something great with their lives.” So she decided to study criminal justice.

However, Shendy never considered going into law enforcement until after she graduated from Kent State with a bachelor’s degree in justice studies. At the time, one of her criminal justice professors, James Owens (who also ran the newly resurrected Kent State Police Academy in 2007) told her that she’d make a great officer. He had noted her communication skills, compassionate character and love of working with people. “I made the decision to join the academy and fell in love with law enforcement,” Shendy says. “Since then, my life has never been the same.”

At first, she says, her parents did not support her decision (“Who wants their daughter to go into police work?”) but they eventually accepted it when they saw how passionate she was about her chosen career and how good she was at the job. “I wouldn’t be as happy or fulfilled if it wasn’t for how amazing and supportive my family has been,” Shendy says. “I celebrate all my work anniversaries every year because I love my job so much and all that it has allowed me to do and accomplish. And, of course, because of the wonderful people I meet on their darkest days. They are the reason I get up every day and do what I do.”

After graduating from the police academy (the first class to graduate since
Shendy was chosen to chair the community policing subcommittee of the Ohio Attorney General’s Advisory Group on Law Enforcement Training in 2014. The 16-member panel was appointed by then-Attorney General Mike DeWine to make recommendations on how police officers are trained in Ohio, in an effort to address distrust and unrest sparked by police use of force in the Black community. The committee completed its objective in April 2015.

While still working for the Copley Police Department, she was recruited as a Law Enforcement Training Officer for the Ohio Peace Officer Training Academy, where she taught from 2016 to 2020. She also served as a terrorism liaison officer in the Northeast Ohio region, trained to support public safety and handle the threat of terrorism.

In June 2020, Ohio Governor Mike DeWine appointed Shendy to become the first director of the newly created Office of Law Enforcement Recruitment—following clashes between police and protestors in Columbus and Cleveland after the death of George Floyd.

She has given talks at mosques about law enforcement. “Many Muslims don’t understand what US police officers do and why,” she says. “They compare law enforcement in this country to law enforcement in Middle Eastern countries. And that’s not the same. For example, in Middle Eastern countries, community-oriented policing does not exist. The police are not there to be your friend or protect you; they are there to protect the government and country. That’s different than in the United States, where citizens have so many rights and freedoms, despite the fact that tragedies can still happen. I talk about basic things, like what to do if you’re stopped by the police. In Middle Eastern countries, if the police stop you, you get out of the car. Here, of course, you don’t want to do that.”

She also encourages women and minorities to consider the profession. “A lot of us may shy away from doing things that make us stand out or feel different. However, in law enforcement our differences are what make us an asset to our departments and our communities. With a diverse group of officers, we will have so much talent and cultural knowledge in our police departments; it would be a huge benefit to our communities.”

Shendy is working on getting Ohio to accommodate women officers who wear a religious head scarf, known in the Muslim religion as a hijab. “That accommodation exists in a lot of other states, but not in Ohio,” she says. “Changing that would open the door for women and minorities from all backgrounds.”

A number of the nearly 900 law enforcement agencies in Ohio have started contacting Shendy about the job openings they have available, which she plans to list on the Ohio Office of Law Enforcement Recruitment website as soon as the technology is in place.

“It will make the hiring and application process a lot easier for potential recruits,” she says. “We’re also developing a mentorship program because having support while you’re going through the academy is extremely important, especially when it comes to women and minorities.”

While Shendy’s career has allowed her to work in many communities throughout Ohio, she stays connected to Kent State in both her personal and professional life. “There are five kids in my family and four of us graduated from Kent State,” Shendy says. While a student at the Kent Campus, she joined campus organizations that not only helped her feel connected to the university community, but also helped her expand her understanding of the world.

One of those organizations was the Muslim Student Association (MSA). “My sisters [Shimaa Shendy, BS ’07, Ayat Shendy, BS’08, and Fatima Shendy, BS ’16, MS ’18] and I were all members of the MSA,” she says. “It definitely helped us meet diverse groups of students on campus; I met students from Sudan, India, Pakistan and Algeria. I still keep in touch with some of them today. We also had dinners and activities with other religious groups on campus, and it helped increase our awareness and knowledge about other religions and cultures.”

Shendy says her time at Kent State also prepared her for where she is today. “I had the best professors and advisors. They had real-life experience, were knowledgeable and passionate about criminal justice, and I knew they cared. They believed in me and pushed me to reach my full potential. When I speak to young men and women about attending college or the police academy, I always recommend Kent State.”

In her current role, Shendy’s evident passion for helping underrepresented minority and women candidates is clear. “If you want to become a change agent in your community, if you want to advocate for vulnerable populations and speak on behalf of those who cannot speak for themselves, if you feel your calling is to help others rise, heal and move past trauma—then your calling is law enforcement,” she says. “We’re in the business of saving and changing lives, and nothing beats that. The ability to help, forgive, and bring others to healing and progress is my absolute favorite part of the job—and, I feel, the most honorable.”

Learn about the Ohio Office of Law Enforcement Recruitment at https://www.ocrs.ohio.gov/lfr.

Learn about Kent State’s Peace Officer Training Academy at https://www.kent.edu/policeacademy.