

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

The following interview took place in the Heaven Scent Fragrances office during November 2001. It reflects the driving force behind this company that evolved as a result of necessity, determination, creativity and faith.

### Q: How did you start? Describe your beginning.

I was working for the city of Newark with a Federal Program that Newark was the sponsor of. I was an administrative employee, actually a city employee. When the program was cut, I was laid off. I had a family, we had just had a child, and at the time my second occupation was as a professional musician. I tried to make it just off the music for a while, and it didn't work out because it just so happened in 1979-83 it was the disco era. I wasn't getting as much work because I was a jazz musician. All the Jazz clubs were closing, and the ones that were trying to stay open were converting to disco clubs because disco was the big thing. Some musicians felt they just had to become disco musicians. Then the disco live music got replaced by the DJ's playing the music. Disco doesn't require live musicians, some people like the records better. Basically I got forced out of the music business because of disco. Then I tried to work a couple of summer jobs, summer program jobs that I could get through connections I had through city people that I knew. But that was just so frustrating because they didn't pay much and they also were degrading type of jobs. Nobody respected you for your

education or what you could do, it was mainly just a political job, and you were there, just a lackey type of job. After I did that one summer I said I wasn't doing that type of job anymore. Someone offered me something else similar to that and I turned it down. I didn't know what I was going to do, I was on unemployment, I was trying to play music, and I was looking for something because all of this was coming to an end; unemployment, playing music. Then in 1982 I signed up to substitute teach and I was placed at Westside High School in Newark. I was given a class to take over because the teacher was ill, after having an operation. I taught his class up until January of 1993. I did well with the class and they even wanted me to apply to be full time because I had a college degree. I didn't want to teach but my family needed money, so I said that I would just stay as a substitute on per diem. After I became per diem they weren't calling me that much. I would get a call here and there from different schools, it was different. It was a little better actually when I was going in every day for that one teacher. I had a good situation compared to when I went per diem. So now I was really desperate. I got to the point where I was going to have to move out of my apartment, it was putting a stress on my marriage, my wife was pretty much ready to bail out on me, and we had just had another baby. We would have had to move in with my parents, I had even discussed it with them. And

they said "fine". They didn't like that; they didn't really want us to move in with them. They were really not happy about it either. Everybody was looking at me like I was a failure. Implying "You can't take care of your own family." Then I started hanging out with a friend of mine who was in the same type or similar business that I am in now in Elizabeth NJ. His name was Abdul-Bashir; we went to high school together. He was kind of like the guy who created the template for this. He didn't know what he had at the time, he was selling oils as designer fragrances, and this was his idea. He had approached a company that could make this. Before that all that was available was Egyptian Musk, Frankincense and Mir, Somali Rose, Genitor Naim, Ferdose; all these fragrances that were considered quote unquote; Muslim Fragrances. These were sold in oil. And he found out that all these oils that were being sold, were actually used to scent perfumes. They were put in a perfume base solution and this was the scent, even the Somali Rose and Egyptian Musk. They were being sold in this form but they were actually manufacturing products to put in the perfume solutions. And overseas, in other countries they were actually making perfumes with these fragrances. Because Muslims, according to Islam are not supposed to use alcohol, internally, you can put it on your external part, but it's better if you don't have to. So because perfume had alcohol in it, it was preferable to use the oils.

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

And so this is how this thing started, even overseas, it was sold like this too.

### Q: What did he cut it with?

Well he didn't cut them. He didn't have to cut them. Actually the perfumes are cut fragrances. When you buy perfume and cologne that has been cut. When you take the oil that we sell and put in a perfume solution, or cologne solution or toilet water solution, and each solution, for example what makes perfume more expensive is because it has the highest concentration of fragrance per solution. Cologne has a little less, toilet water has the least; and there are different grades even of perfumes, and so it's a lot to that. You start to find out these things when you get in this business. So what he did, he bought those things, he started selling them and revolutionized the market, by introducing people to oil versions of the brand name designer scents. One more thing, he was the first person to sell oils that I know of to sell oils in roll-on bottles. He found a warehouse full of these bottles and nobody was buying them. They were originally for some kind of lip gloss or cosmetic, but they weren't being sold in any kind of volume. This guy had a warehouse full of them and he started losing money on them. Over a period of about 3 years my friend ended up purchasing the entire stock at about 20 cases at a time. He revolutionized the market with that, roll-on applicators. Before that there were other types of bot-

les – the most desired bottle had a wand, as used overseas and you rub the oil on with the wand. So he came up with the roll-on which actually helped to bring the fragrances to the everyday person. It took it out of the ethnic, Muslim communities and brought it to everyone because they had heard of these names.

### Q: Was that here just on the East Coast?

It started right here in NJ. Now I don't know of any other place that was doing it, because he was the first person I ever heard of and he was getting business from coast to coast. At one time he was making tremendous money.

### Q: Was he doing mail order?

He was doing mail order but it wasn't sophisticated. Because he is not really a technical guy, His catalogue was hand written. He paid somebody with excellent handwriting to write it out for him. Then he sent them a Xerox copy of a price list with all the names and prices, that's how unsophisticated it was. But still and all he was making a lot of money. There were other companies that predated him that were selling the more traditional oils, and he immediately jumped ahead of these companies because people were trying to get his product or the bottles from all over the country. Sometimes he was just selling cases of bottles. He would go to the warehouse and get 20 cases just to ship bottles.

He encouraged me. He said look, I can show you how to get out of your financial difficulty if you listen to me. I said OK I'm listening. He said "do you have any money to invest?" I said "I have 40 dollars." That's what I started my whole business with \$40. He said "Give me the \$40 and I'll set you up. So he sat down and he picked out \$40 worth of oils that he felt were really hot a selection of about 7-8 ounces. Then he gave me some incense, not in the bundles like I have it now, that was really one of my ideas, I won't say I innovated it, but I took that bundle concept to the next level. Nobody was selling incense in bundles like we do now. They were only selling it in the packs of 20 sticks. He gave me a couple dozen of those, then he gave me some miscellaneous things like bottles that he had poured for people, then they wanted bigger bottles. And because I was a friend of his he just gave me some stuff to take with me. Then he told me what to do and sent me out. So I went out and I made a few dollars like \$15-\$20 a day for a little while and he said "Well you are not making enough money" So he went out with me and he showed me how to expose people to the products. Let the oils be seen at all times, don't walk down the street with it in a box, because that's what I was doing, he would hold it in a way that it was in display, even when we were walking. People would stop us on the street. Here was a guy who was making about \$10,000 a week in his store but he

## **Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances**

**By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin**

took the time because I was a friend to show me how he started his business from the ground up. Within a ½ hour with him I had made about \$35 and I hadn't made that much all day every day on my own. So from there on I was on my own, but I got it, I got the idea. I went out, persevered trying to make some money.

Now when I started my business the crazy thing about it was, I started like I told you. I went all the way up to the first of the year teaching this guys class, when I came back in January I went per diem, I was starving to death, I was on the verge of moving back to my parents house and I had given my last \$40 to my friend in a desperate move, because I knew \$40 wasn't going to save me. He gave me back about \$65 worth of product for \$40, sent me out and within 2 weeks I had made enough money to pay my rent, pay my back rent and put food on the table. Everyday I would go back and restock. As far as I was concerned I had found my answer temporarily because that's all I really wanted to do, I wasn't really trying to make anything, I just wanted to pay my bills and put food on the table. That was it. I didn't want to have to move, I just wanted to hold on. At this point I didn't really see a lot of potential in making a lot of money. I just saw a way to maintain.

I had started in February, there was considered at that time no business. Christmas was over, New Years was over. And to the vendors that were still around,

that were just passing through, nobody was out there but me. I had the whole downtown to myself because they were all on vacation. They had made all their money for the year and I was like a big joke standing out there. But it wasn't a joke to me because what they considered small time money, I needed that money to feed my family. So I stayed out there. It was freezing, I didn't have the proper cloths to go out there but I had to be out there. So by the time they started showing up in March, I had actually established myself a little bit. I had had no competition. I was out there freezing and starving for a whole month, but I did have some base clientele now. Because there were some people who were patronizing me even if it was in small amounts. So when the vendors came back on the street I was able to still prevail against the competition that showed up, plus I had a unique product. So what I did, all the big guys pushed me off the main avenues so I went around the corner by the Masjid on Branford Place and setup for a while. And I built up a really big business over there. I got to the point that I was making about \$300 per day and I wasn't even on Market Street. Then the vendors started coming around there to see what I was doing because they had heard about me selling all this stuff. Now the advantage of me being around the corner on Branford place and not where the main activity was that nobody knew about my merchandise, nobody knew about the roll-on bot-

ties. There were some merchants out there selling oils and incense but all they had was Somali Rose, Egyptian Musk, Fardous, Naim and Noor. They just had that kind of stuff. And they didn't have roll on bottles. So these guys started sending spies around the corner. Because people starting asking them "Are you the guy with the Lauren" are you the guy with Oscar De Laurenta?" "Do you have White Linen?" "Do you have this or that?" And the vendors said well they don't make that and the guy said "there's a guy right around the corner selling it like that".

So I started getting all of their business, until these guys started coming around to see what I was doing. They had pushed me out; they didn't want me over there with them. Now they were really wondering what was going on. By then I was making a lot of money and they started sending the police on me, because I didn't have a license, I didn't know what I was doing. Then I realized why all the vendors stayed together and weren't on some isolated street, that was protection for each other. If you didn't have a license they would say "Here comes the police" so you knew to get the heck out of there. After getting dogged by the police a couple of times I decided to go by the main area with the rest of the vendors. So I did that. Now in order for me to do that, everybody had a spot that they claimed to work in. So there was only one area that was left for me. There was a garbage can that was very filthy and actu-

## **Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances**

**By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin**

ally it was starting to become warm weather by the time I built up this business. When you went by the garbage can all that stuff was fermenting and smelling bad. Nobody wanted to get near that garbage can. But that was the only place I had. So I went and I setup right next to the garbage can. And they used to laugh at me again saying "He's got the spot by the garbage can. Ha, Ha, Ha." So what I did in selling oils and incense I would put incense all around this garbage and light it up and the smell in whole area would be wiped out. People would see that and they started buying incense like crazy saying "If your incense is that good; enough wipe out that smell from the garbage can than I want it."

Now at this time I was getting it from my friend in Elizabeth, NJ. And I was getting to the point that I was buying incense from him so frequently he couldn't keep up the supply. I was now pushing his limits of supplying me and he was making a lot of money from me. If I was making \$300 a day I would take my whole \$300 down there and spend it with him. I would keep re-investing, re-investing, I barely ate lunch. I barely did anything other than work. Actually he was my only supplier and I got to a point that I actually was starting to give him some competition with his own product, even though I was spending all my money with him. So he started not having some of the things I needed. He wasn't always in stock like he used to be. So I

started looking for other suppliers. In the process of looking for other suppliers I began to see what poor grade product was out there. My suppliers really had good quality. That was another reason why I was doing well. So I started buying from these select suppliers but soon got to the point that my requirements started even challenging their capabilities. They were big manufacturers who were not Muslims. When they saw you starting to move up they felt threatened by that. Most of the suppliers at that time who dominated the fragrance business were Italian..

When the first Christmas holiday came it was like a big blizzard, like -10 below zero the whole month and a lot of the vendors were dropping out. They couldn't take it. So I took my money, and went into some of these army navy stores asking "What did they wear in the Arctic?" I wanted the most thermal insulated stuff they had. Sometimes I would buy a pair of boots for \$200 and they weren't really that good. I wouldn't let that stop me. Sometimes I would go buy another pair because I was making money at this time. So if I had to invest \$200 every day to stay warm I would do it. I finally got the kind of coat I wanted the kind of undergarments I wanted, so when it got to be 10 degrees on Christmas Eve I was out there making more than \$1,000 on Christmas Eve. By the time New years was over I had \$5000 in cash saved in \$100 bills sitting on my dresser. Then I took that

\$5000 and I went looking for a store. I looked and looked while discovering that all the stores downtown the rent was about \$5000 per month. So I couldn't afford that. So I started looking for an alternative. So I said what I'm going to have to do is get an office. I'll get an office and I'll try to setup some wholesale business through my office. Let me just get an office where I can have a telephone, and place to do business off of the street. Cause I was still setup on the street. And I wound up in an office over the movie theater. Now I had all of this space (which is just about as much space as I have now) and it was on 2 levels, upstairs and downstairs. That place had not been rented in about 9 or 10 years. They were desperate to rent it. Nobody wanted it. It was useless space over a movie theater. The movie theater was still open when I moved in there. The rent was \$400 a month for all of that space, but it was off the ground floor. So I had to think about it. Because I didn't know what I would do, because I just wanted a little office. So I decided to take it partly because I had accumulated all this merchandise in my apartment, and my wife was going crazy. The whole living room looked like a warehouse. So I rented the place and brought all of that stuff down there and just left it there for about the first month or 2 just to store it. Eventually I got a phone put in, I setup a little office and I still had all this space. One day a guy came to me while street vending and asked

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

did I need any showcases. I said OK and I bought the showcase and just stored them upstairs. Then I found some displays people threw out and I said let me set this up in here. And I set it up like a little showroom. Then I said well nobody knows that I have a showroom. So I hired a guy to stay up there and I started steering business to him from off the street. I started telling my street customers that I have a store. Then I created a little flyer to give to people. And a lot of people thought it was a joke until they went up there and saw that I had it setup really nice. I was so hungry to have a store that I created a store out of nothing. People used to say "well you'll never get people to come up there". And at first I thought they were right but again there was nobody competing with what I was doing. And I wasn't yet doing wholesaling, I was doing retailing. Then on the bad weather days I would go stand up under an awning or something with my flyers and people would say "your not working today?" and I would say "No, its raining but you can go to my store." And I started building a few regular customers.

I got to the point where I had to start to learn to make my own incense. Because as I said earlier my friend couldn't supply me fast enough, I was out of incense to often. So I started going to other places to get incense made. I was going all over the place, until finally I was doing so much running around, one day I said look, I have to learn how to

make this stuff. So I found somewhere to buy a case of raw incense punks (I probably paid to much) I bought some incense oils, and other stuff that I thought I needed and I got a guy that I knew, knew how to do it. And I had it all laid out and I brought him up there and I said show me how to do it. He told me how to do it and said all right you are tricking me right? But he still showed me how to do it. And from there I started making my own incense from that day. I just started developing my own technique really. Because once I saw what he was doing I improved upon it. Everything people show me I try to find a better more efficient way. And so that's what I was doing with him.

So I started making incense but I was only making it for me. At that point I wasn't trying to make it for wholesale. I was just trying to make it to cover my needed cases a week. Until one day a brother came to me who was the first one to ask to buy incense from me wholesale. "You gotta sell me a case." I said "I really don't want to do that." He said "Well how much would you charge me?" He took a \$100 out shoved it in my hand and said "I'll be back tomorrow!" Have me a case of incense! So I made him a case and he was very happy. My incense was starting to build a reputation. I had learned how to do it well and I was doing well with it. He wanted in on it.

Then people started coming for wholesale incense. Then "Do you sell oils? Do you sell bottles? So

I had to start stocking more of everything because now I was overstocked on everything.

### **Q: Were you putting your label on it at the time?**

Yes Absolutely. Actually I was making labels. I did a little hand written label with some black electrical tape and a gold ink pen. It looked nice but it was still makeshift. Then I found out where to get labels made later. Things happened in a progression like that. I went through several different stages like that until I found a company where I could get labels made. Because I had some money to develop this stuff. I had to learn everything on my own. People didn't offer solutions to me right away I went to printers and tried to get stuff made and it wasn't the right quality. Back then regular printers were not specialized in making labels. Now days they are, but then they were like stationary printers. Now you can go to a printer because computers have given more ability to the average person.

I now began to see the advantage of selling wholesale. Whatever I wasn't selling to my retail customers I should just sell it off wholesale and get my money back and reinvest it again in places that I might need it more. That became my modus operandi. Now I sell my incense with my name, so that resellers had to buy mine, somebody else's, or make their own. I don't supply people to make it anymore. If I was going to do that, I would just go into that business, selling supplies.

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

But since I make incense and it has become such a big item, I don't see the point in selling supplies to anybody. That's how I got out of selling supplies. I tried selling a lot of different things.

### Q: So that's basically how you got going?

That's how I got going. Then I met a brother named Mustafaa, who told me I needed to get a computer. He looked at my operation and said I can help you get this thing into the national market. I listened to him. And he couldn't believe I listened to everything he said. He wasn't used to that. (Laughter)

### Q: Now some quick questions on your background? What high school did you go to?

Weequahic High school, graduated in 1970.

### Q: College?

Rutgers University, majored in psychology, minored in music performance, graduated class of 1974

### Q: What instruments do you play?

I play the Acoustic Bass and the Electric Bass. Some of the musicians I have played with include Frank Foster, very briefly with Winton Marcellus, Howard McGee, Andy Bey, Carter Jefferson, Richard Wynes, Jackie Bayard, Al Hibler and many others.

### Q: Your market is primarily African American and Muslim? How is your market composed?

I would say 50% of my market is Muslim, and 75% of my market is African American and Muslim, a combination. Then there's 25% of my market that is White American, Latino, and Asian.

### Q: That's internet business?

Most of my non-Black customers and some white are walk in retail customers. Yesterday a military white woman from the air force walked in and everybody stopped talking. We were talking about cars, no, motorcycles, it was guy talk. So we stopped talking. She thought we stopped talking because she was military and we were Muslim, she walked in a Muslim store, and she thought it was funny. She said "You shouldn't stop talking." But we were just talking about motorcycles and guys that we know that have been in accidents with broken legs and stuff like that. We get customers like that. I have some regular white customers from when I was on the street. White customers that really supported me to this day.

### Q: What are some of the trials and tribulations you have been through?

At the very peak of my business in 1992, when I was making more money than I ever made Right in the midst of that, during the month of Ramadan, there was a fire in the building where we had the store. The

building was destroyed on the rooftop. It wasn't my store but there was a lot of smoke damage and water damage. From that point on I was in a real struggle to survive to keep my business going. The city tried to condemn the building. They shut the water off. Then the electricity was shut off. And we still had business to do. So I rented an office down the street over the Masjid, and put my secretary in there and somebody to take orders, and we toughed it out in the store because we had everything we needed to make the incense, dip the incense and wait on the customers. I went and got butane lanterns and portable heaters to try to keep the business going. I was in a struggle with the city, in legal battles with everybody. My lawyer was trying to help me keep the city from closing the building, while the landlord was trying to get the property condemned so he could get his insurance settlement. That struggle lasted from 1992, I relocated in 1995, and it took me close to 1999 to recover from that. When I finally recovered the market had changed. It was a different market, other competitors had come along, some of the competitors had been former employees of mine, trying to use my concepts against me. So I had to reinvent Heaven-Scent a little bit. That's when I decided to use my passion for computers - I'm known to a lot of people as the gadget guy - people who work for me always laugh and say how I love gadgets - And you just happened to be the guy who got me

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

hooked on this type of stuff (laughter). I didn't like it always, some guy named Mustafaa walked in here talking about I need a computer. The rest is history.

So I sat down and starting developing marketing materials with the computer. Developing things that would help me streamline my operation because I couldn't afford the amount of employees to do things that I was doing before. The goal was to automate myself as much as possible with computers. Then I sat down and read everything I could about e-commerce. Contemplating how I could have a e-commerce website. That started in 1997. I had not fully recovered yet. I was looking at the possibility of getting out of business, I was still struggling, deep in debt, didn't know how I was going to pay it off. So I researched until I found a website designer that I wanted to deal with. I read a thing once about the cats that host websites are the digital landlords. And the landlords of the future are the website hosts. This is very true because if you have a presence on the net that's almost like a physical presence somewhere. And if they are hosting you they are your landlords, they charge you rent to host your website. I opened a merchant's account allowing me to process credit cards that I didn't even have at the time. And I was in the e-commerce business. I financed my website with my credit card. I didn't have any money. I was trying to get a small business loan, which would have taken too

have taken too long. So I said well, this is it . This is my last shot. I'm gonna go out on my shield. I'm gonna take my credit card, I'm already in debt, I'm gonna just blow it up and whatever happens, happens. And fortunately for me things worked out OK. When we finally put the website on the net, accessible to all search engines, etc., I got an order the second day. I got an order from a Sister in Chicago named Sariah Faheem, who had been ordering from me in the past. Order # 1 was Sariah Faheem. I didn't tell her about it, she found it. The first month I was on the internet I must have done about 20 orders. It's been uphill ever since. This is what helped pull me out of the doldrums. I've been on the road to recovery ever since.

I read another article by a young Pakistani or Indian Brother, who said throughout history there has always been an age. The Iron Age, Bronze Age, Stone Age, etc. And in each age whatever group of people grasped that technology first, dominated throughout that age. When it got to the industrial age, that's what put Westerners over the Muslims, because the Muslims did not grasp the industrial age fast enough. Then came the technological age, and now we are in the information age. And every time a new age comes, a different people have a chance. Sometimes the same people continue to dominate, but sometimes other people have a chance to enter in. The author said this information age is

the Muslims chance to dominate. This is one of the first things I read before I decided to go e-commerce. I really embraced that idea, that this was the time for me to do it now. The Muslims had to get involved in this now and this was our chance for economic upliftment. To really get to that level where we had a foundation, a economic base, that this was our chance. We are going to come up now against all these big industrialist's that have already been established. That's an uphill fight.....

**Q: What are the benefits of your product to the people? What is good about oils, incense and the other items you carry?**

It depends on your purpose. If you're selling it, the purpose is it's a strong brand name, that's been built up over 16, 17 years now. We are one of the first. Even my friend that was making all the money. He never had the presence in the market that I have. I built a legacy of quality based on a standard that he actually set. I saw how that benefited me in a small arena on the street. Even the people that were trying to desperately compete with me with these other fragrances. Even when they found a supplier, their suppliers weren't good. They were buying all these cheap things that weren't really good because they didn't really know what to get, they didn't have a standard to base the quality on. These were new products. My standard of quality beat my competition every time.

## Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances

By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin

### Q: What is it that makes it quality?

The fragrances that I sell are made by the best Perfumologist, which is a type of chemists that deal with the fragrances. They use the best ingredients. There are myths about the ingredients. Some people think that only natural ingredients are best. That's not necessarily the case. There are synthetic ingredients that will give you a much better end product. Synthetic doesn't always mean harsh chemicals. If you do everything all natural then you get into the area of what they call "Essential Oils". That's why they cost so much more than these perfume body oils.

### Q: What is the benefit of incense?

Incense provides a psychological and a spiritual enhancement to a person's life. I was told by a brother when I first got into this business about fragrance in general; he said that every scent that exists attaches itself to some emotion. When you come in contact with a scent, some emotion is stimulated. It brings up a memory, a feeling, a passion, something. And people select the fragrances that they say they like based on what that brings up in the psyche or subconscious. Whatever they connected to that somewhere along the line in life. He pointed out to me, Sheik Hesham Jabber (and his 2 sons) who actually pretty much sat me by his knee and taught me this business. Hesham taught me that incense was not a

necessity of life in the sense of food, clothing or shelter. But watch how the people react when they want the product. They will say things like, I need my incense, I need my oils. Because its one of the psychological and emotional necessities. Fragrance is a comforting thing. It's something that enhances your life. It enhances the quality of the life in a very simple and cost efficient way. And once people discover it they have to have it. That's why all this aroma therapy is becoming very popular now. Because fragrance is therapeutic. It does enhance you life in a therapeutic, emotional way it's a simple thing that can enhance and give pleasure to your life. And you can share it with people. It's part of the Sunnah of the Muslims. Muslims have always known this. That's why you go to the Masjid and if a brother puts on some fragrance you're supposed to share it with a Brother. One of the Sunnah's of the Prophet was that he used fragrance. So this is a thing that is part of Islam, but it is also part of the Human beings psychological makeup to like good and pleasant smells. Even the Hadith talks about the pleasant smells in paradise, there would be bad smells in (jainum) Hell. The smell is a very significant creation that Allah made. Quran and Hadith talk about the fragrance of paradise.

Hesham taught me that business itself is a Sunnah of the Prophet. To be self employed is the best occupation. The Prophet even recommended that... Be-

cause now you are accountable directly to Allah for your sustenance, and that was his Sunnah. He said always look at business as being your right. It is a right and a blessing that Allah gave you that you have a choice to do business. It is a Sunnah that Allah will always give an extra blessing and an extra help to the person who makes the sacrifice to do business. Especially for a fair business for the benefit of other people and to enhance the good deeds for the Muslims and enhance Islam. This is a Sunnah and something you are doing for His pleasure.

### Q: What do you feel is your role and responsibility is as a business person and a Muslim business person?

The roles are similar, although there is a difference. The Muslim aspect transcends the African American dimension because it gets into following the practices of Islam. The Addab that we are supposed to have. And in both cases, in business, whoever you are, but especially if you're Muslim and African American, you become an ambassador. You deal with people and you represent something as an ambassador. In a business position dealing with all kinds of people, you become an ambassador for Islam. People will judge Islam based on how you do business. I found that to be the case. And they will also judge African Americans and what their qualifications are to do business by how you do business. If you're an incompetent businessman, they will consider

## **Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances**

**By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin**

consider African-Americans to be incompetent. And they will judge people unfairly as a group based on what you do. So in both cases it is very important, even though it is actually a part of the Sunnah to do whatever you do, do it excellent. I recall reading, more than once, talks by Imam Warith Deen Mohammed about why Muslims should strive to do things, in whatever walk of life, whatever they do, to be as excellent as possible. This is the same advice that Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) gave to all of us. He said when you do something you are to do it to the best of your ability. I believe that. The other responsibility is to give something back. I mean literally financially and time wise back, so that the Muslims and the community at large, whatever community you are in, can benefit. Our community, the African American community, of which I am an African American and grew up in this community, have been in Newark most of my life, in the Essex county Newark area all of my life. And I know the needs in the Newark, New Jersey metropolitan, Philadelphia, Connecticut area, and other places I've been; the African-American is the one struggling the most to develop the concepts of business. When we did have it in the past was we sort of circumvented ourselves by jumping ahead into the industrial revolution, trying to get jobs in the North, everybody knows that story. And we left behind a little tradition because it hadn't developed enough. If we had continued to develop it we

might have been on a different level now, but we sort of stunted our growth, based on our economic needs we had at the time, to try to get finances for our families at the time. There are numerous examples of African-Americans that established businesses that have become prosperous from an old Southern base from the old segregated south, and maintained that business, developed it through more than one generation, now it's a successful business to this day. I was thinking about the African-American woman, I think her name was May Johnson that developed those beauty care products. She was a hair dresser, and became the first black female millionaire. I always think about her as a perfect example. There are other people too. The Johnson Publications also started during the times of segregation trying to publish their magazines and they stayed with it. But we lost that. That's something we are actually trying to reclaim as a people. We abandoned that for something we thought was better. Now a lot of us are rediscovering it. That's one reason I like the wholesale business. Because it puts me in a position to help other people get into business. And those that need it and want it you can mentor to them and give them some guidance on how to go. I have always tried to do that. And even a lot of the employees I have, I try to employ a lot of young brothers. And over the years I have employed so many young brothers, they have gone on to do other

things, even if they didn't stay in business it helped to develop their character to see somebody independent. Even though I was the owner of the business and they were working for me, they took pride in the fact that this was a free enterprise, independent operation. And it was run by some people from the community doing business and they became very competent they got an opportunity to do things that they had not been given in other places, such as representing my company on the telephone. They have taken orders from all over the world. Negotiating with people on my behalf. When they would travel or were on vacation visiting people, they saw that they actually ran into people that knew my company and they were representative of that. And so over the years it has been a very positive experience. The brothers developed a lot of self confidence and self esteem by being involved with Heaven Scent. I now see some of these brothers out here in my day to day activities and it's amazing to see how far some of them have gone. Some have gone on to college, medical school, some are professionals, some have other types of businesses, they all have families, and they all are very stable. I can't think of anybody that worked here that did not become a very stable contributing member of the community. I think some of them were teetering on the edge, before I took them in, but it seems like that got them on the right course. I take a lot of pride in that. And that's one

## **Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances**

**By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin**

of my responsibilities. It's just arbitrary. I felt obligated to do it. We have a need for this. When we had the Islamic school they used to take field trips. They used to bring the kids to my store. This would happen year after year. I was one of the places they used to come. And when they would come I would show them the whole operation. I would show them how to dip their own bundle of incense. And I let them rap it and take it home. I would give them all a small bottle of oil as a gift, and who knows some of these kids are doing great things today. It was just very positive. The school always looked very positively on how I handled that in an effort to make it very special for the kids.

I've had a lot of involvement with the correctional facilities with Muslims. In some cases, not most, some did a lot to structure their own situations, but in a few cases I was able to help them get their situation structured at the prison, so that they could receive items that they needed, Islamic items, so they could do sales, a lot of the sales went for charities and fundraisers inside and outside the institution. And I have received letters over the years of thank you and appreciation. That was another responsibility that kind of found me. My contact with the correctional system really became solidified through the fact that I advertised in the Muslim Journal.

**Q: What would be your advice to other Muslim business people**

**as to the importance of advertising?**

I have advertised in the Muslim Journal since 1986, and I immediately saw results. The Muslim Journal is the main print publication that I advertise in to this day and that I always advertise in. I have never had one more effective for my business than the Muslim Journal and besides all the Muslims that it reaches from one end of the coast to the other and Canada, the Caribbean places where people have told me that they became aware of my business through the Muslim Journal. And the inmate population that it reaches, a lot of non Muslims have contacted me based on them seeing my ad in the Muslim Journal. And not all of them were African American either. I don't know if a Muslim showed them the paper or if they were regular subscribers, but they pointed out to me that they had seen our ad in the Muslim Journal. Even from non Muslims who were not African American. You can't stereotype its readership. Yes it's the Muslim Journal. Yes it transmits information to Muslims about Muslims and Muslim activities. Especially a lot of activities that come out of the work of Imam W. Deen Mohammed. But a lot of other communities and other things too.

**Q: What about Military purchases?**

All the military purchases I used to get were through the Muslim Journal. Now I get more from the Internet, because the

internet is heavily utilized by the military, even on a personal level. This is how they stay in contact with their family and friends. Most of the military people that I do business with, and a lot of them are Muslim, but some of them are not Muslim, send me articles about what's going on in the military after I develop a relationship with them.

**Q: How has the computer changed your business and your ability to do business?**

Based on everything I said now, that's the key to everything. If you're doing business now and you don't have computer technology intimately involved in a major way in your business than your business is in the Stone Age. That's the bottom line. Only because I just don't have the resources yet, is why I'm not more involved and integrated using computers. Computers are the ultimate tool – for everything. Business and personal. The amount of knowledge available to be accessed, and things that can be made available about Islam on the net is truly unbelievable. You can learn everything you want about Islam, you can contact scholars, take courses, learn to recite the Quran. I just regret that I don't have the kind of time just to spend just on that. But in regards to business there is no way a person can be separated today from business and computer technology. And specifically internet, but not just internet. That's top technology. It saves you so much money and makes you so much

## **Interview of Salim Abdus-Salaam, President and Founder of Heaven-Scent Fragrances**

**By Mustafaa Abdul-Baatin**

more efficient. It gives you the ability to do so much more in house that you don't have to turn over to other people. If you just develop a little time to develop the skills. And you can really personalize the vision of your business. You can conceive all of your own advertising in the way that you perceive it within your vision. Nobody can do these things better than you can once you develop the skills. Now you may need some training to know what you should put in an ad or how to present something. But if you can pull all those things together and bring it out through your vision, you will get the best result because nobody will have the vision you have. I have seen people who really wanted to do, to give me some tremendous impact, and they did an excellent job. But once I took over from there. And infused my own personal vision, once I had learned what they had given me and go further with it, I always got a better result. Because nobody can do better with your own vision of your business than you can. There is a concept in all of this that I have, and I try to bring it out in every piece of literature, etc. The only way others can touch my concept is through the things that I put out. They all build into this imagery, this concept of how I perceive Heaven Scent as a company and its relationship to the people who interact with it, customers and service people etc. Heaven Scent is about the future, that's for sure.

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