

Linda K. Wertheimer

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Sharon Peters reached into a hot pink cloth bag and pulled out an abaya from Kuwait. As if she were modeling for a fashion show, the world geography teacher stuck her arms out sideways and held the garment against her to show how far it stretched, from the tips of the fingers on one hand to the fingertips on the other. She slipped her arms through, letting the black polyester cloth hang loosely from her shoulders to her moccasin-clad feet. She apologized for her inauthenticity: Normally, she would wear sandals. Next, she held a black filmy veil to her face, then echoed what she said to her freshman advanced geography students each year at Lumberton High School in Lumberton, a dot of a town 100 miles east of Houston near the Louisiana border. “I want you to put it in front of your face so you can see how others in the world live.” Imagine, she says in her native southeast Texas twang, what it would be like to see the world through gauze.

Like a magician about to unveil the next trick, she reached into the bag again and clutched a royal blue burka from Afghanistan, a garment that conceals the wearer from head to toe and includes mesh over the eyes. “OK, this is our famous burka incident,” she says, and her previously gentle tone turns stern, “This is the only damn burka. These others have different names.”¹

It was the fall of September 2013, and Peters was giving me an impromptu Middle Eastern fashion show in her living room in her one-story ranch home in Lumberton. She didn’t try on the burka, though, because it is child-sized, big enough for a very short 14-year-old but not for a 60-

¹ Interview with Sharon Peters, Lumberton, Texas, Sept. 20, 2013.

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something woman around 5-foot, 5-inches tall. Peters was reliving a painful lesson. It was a dress-up activity she had used for years, but that had just months before turned her last year of public school teaching into a shambles. For weeks, it was as if her entire 39-year teaching career was under attack. Strangers sent emails accusing her and the school system of corrupting children and attempting to convert them to Islam. She had for more than a decade encouraged students to try on Middle Eastern clothing as part of instruction about Islam and the Middle East. During her Feb. 1, 2013, class, as always, students took photos of each other. But this time, a photo of five classmates wearing the clothing, including the burka, went on a student's Facebook page and went viral causing an uproar that some teachers now dub "burka gate." Peters had been thinking of retiring at the end of the 2012-13 school year. The controversy sealed the decision.