



Essam Sayed, 45-year-old "mesaharati," or dawn caller beats his drum to wake people up for a meal before sunrise, during the holy month of Ramadan, in the Arab Ghoneim district of Helwan on the southern outskirts of Cairo, Egypt. — AP photos



Children surround Essam Sayed riding his donkey "Aziza," as he wakes people up for a meal before sunrise.



A man gives a tip to Essam Sayed.



Children gather around Essam Sayed.



Children look from their windows to watch Essam Sayed.



A girl holds a traditional lantern.

At Ramadan, Cairo callers wake you up before dawn

Essam Sayed works in a time-honored profession - one that employs him for one month a year. He is a second-generation "mesaharati," which loosely translates from Arabic as "dawn caller." During the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, which ends this week, devout Muslims abstain from all forms of food or drink from dawn until sunset. Once the sun sets, they break the fast with the evening "iftar," or breakfast, and hours later, before dawn they take the vital pre-dawn meal known as "suhour."

Each night, Sayed, 45, sets out after midnight on his donkey through the streets of the Arab Ghoneim district in Helwan province on the southern outskirts of Cairo. He bangs a small drum, chanting traditional religious phrases and calling out to residents by name to wake them in time for the pre-dawn meal.

The job was passed down by his father and Sayed uses the same 50-year-old drum that his father used for decades. The residents offer Sayed tips and donations in exchange for him calling out their family members and children each night as he passes. It's a low-tech profession that continues to endure, mostly in Egypt's more traditional districts.

On one particular summer night, half the neighborhood already seemed to be awake and waiting for Sayed to arrive. Residents gathered on balconies as he passed and the area's children crowded around his donkey.

He says that's normal when Ramadan falls in the summer, when school is out and people stay up later. But the Islamic calendar is 11 days shorter than the western Gregorian calendar, so Ramadan gradually moves through all four seasons. "It's the opposite during winter when people sleep earlier," Sayed said. "That's when I feel the importance of my job." — AP



Children gather around Essam Sayed.



A girl holds a traditional lantern as Essam Sayed bangs his drum and chants to wake people.



Essam Sayed rides his donkey "Aziza".



Essam Sayed, center, eats a meal with his family before sunrise.



Essam Sayed rides his donkey "Aziza," with his grandson Ibrahim.



Essam Sayed rides his donkey "Aziza".