

Arlington Morning News

Arlington's Own Newspaper

www.arlingtonnow.com

Arlington, Texas, Saturday, March 27, 1999

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2 Sections 25 cen

Journey to integration

Islamic institutions taking shape in U.S.

By Deborah Kovach Caldwell
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The Dallas Morning News

The Muslim doctor was overwhelmed when huge numbers of penniless Somali and Bosnian refugees began arriving in the Dallas area five years ago. But Basheer Ahmed, a soft-spoken Indian-born psychiatrist, also saw an opportunity.

The refugees were Muslims. And Dr. Ahmed, 62, decided it was time for the local Islamic community to help. After all, he reasoned, he and his friends had lived in North Texas 30 years or more. They'd raised children and built careers. "I thought we needed to at least try something," he said, recounting the story at his dining room table last week. "But we were not very organized."

About three years ago he held a dinner that raised \$50,000. But he had to ask Catholic and Jewish leaders to speak, because it was those groups that resettled the refugees.

Dr. Ahmed wants to change that—and the time may finally be right.

For the first time in their history in America, the nation's 6 million Muslims are creating a specific national plan to build the kinds of institutions—social service organizations, schools and hospitals—that marked the development in America of Protestants, then Catholics, then Jews.

"We want to build Islamic institutions. Please see Islamic on Page 4A."

4 A Arlington Morning News

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Islamic institutions taking shape in the United States

Continued from Page 1A

in this country like any other religious groups, because if we're going to grow and prosper, we have to have them," said Shariq Siddiqui, director of development and fund-raising for the Islamic Society of North America, based in Indiana.

As Muslims celebrate the end of the season of Hajj on Saturday, they ponder the sacrifices they make to journey to the holy city of Mecca. This year American Muslims also ponder their journey to full integration in America.

Hajj is one of the five pillars of Islamic faith—the others are daily prayers, offering charity, fasting during the month of Ramadan and making a faith declaration. Pilgrimage is a once-a-lifetime obligation for Muslims. When the pilgrimage is complete, Muslims worldwide gather for communal prayer.

This summer, their pilgrimage in America intensifies. Starting in August, ISNA will partner with Indiana University's Center on Philanthropic Studies to educate 10 Muslim students a year as fellows in non-profit management. Once they graduate, the students will be hired in Islamic communities nationwide to raise money, create financial trusts and start schools, social service organizations and hospitals.

"This is probably going to be one of the most dynamic years in the Islamic community's development," Mr. Siddiqui said. "We've built mosques and part-time schools, and our children were born here and have grown up in America. We're now at that level of maturity."

Some of the first seeds were planted in places like North Texas, where in three years Dr. Ahmed has built a sprawling part-time Islamic social services organization.

After his banquet, Dr. Ahmed hosted the Muslim Community Center for Human Services as a hotline for medical, legal and job referrals. Soon after, Dr. Ahmed and his colleagues added a domestic abuse help line. Then they added seminars on parent-child issues.

The seminars were wildly popular—which led Dr. Ahmed to start the Islamic Institute of Human Relations, through which Muslim psychiatrists offer pre-marital, marital and divorce counseling.

His latest offering is Al-Shifa Clinic ("health" in Arabic), which has provided free medical care to Muslims without insurance since fall. The clinic, staffed by 10 Muslim physician volunteers, is open Saturday mornings at the Somaliian Outreach

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— Shariq Siddiqui,
Islamic Society of North America

Community Center in Euless.

For Rabia Ali, a Pakistani immigrant who lives in Carrollton, the clinic's opening was a miracle. Although she has lived in the United States for 20 years and owns a small convenience store, she doesn't have insurance. In the past, she drove to Parkland Hospital in Dallas and waited in a long line to talk with physicians who didn't always understand her halting English.

"I'm so happy they opened it," she said. "They are very helpful."

Dr. Ahmed also hopes to start a center for abused women and a foster-care program for children.

"But to do this work, Dr. Ahmed had to cut his medical practice in half and turn his wood-paneled home office into a command center. Heavy envelope boxes teeter on the edge of table, and piles of papers stand in stacks by the fireplace. He is building another office onto his house just to deal with the community center paperwork.

Later this year, Dr. Ahmed hopes to buy a building in Irving to house the community center's office and activities as well as the clinic.

Next month he will speak about his efforts at a Chicago workshop.

"Everyone is paying attention to the social issues now," he said. "By next year you'll see several centers (across the country) like this."

Dr. Ahmed has grand plans for the community center. Some day it will have a full-time staff. Some day the clinic will be open five days a week and have its own physician. He dreams of opening a hospital.

Dr. Ahmed said he needs a professional fund-raiser to make it happen.

But because of Islamic social rules, he can't hold a charity ball, serve alcohol or play music.

That leaves speakers. "And they're so dry," Dr. Ahmed said with a whistled smile.

So when ISNA's first non-profit management fellows graduate next year, Dr. Ahmed will snap one up.

"We are still using religion—the fear of God—as the main source of our fund-raising appeal," he said. "One of the fellows, I'm hoping, will

use more professional techniques."

Permanent Muslim institutions built with this marketing expertise are the wave of the next decade, said Aly R. Abuzaakouk, executive director of the American Muslim Council in Washington.

Mr. Abuzaakouk, a historian who has lived in the United States for 30 years, launched into a mini-history of American Muslim institutions—culminating in this year's push for permanence.

Muslim students, he said, started coming to America in the 1850s, although most historians agree there have been tiny pockets of Muslims in this country since its founding. By 1963, the first Muslim Student Association was born at Pennsylvania State University. At the time, there were seven mosques in the entire country.

By the early 1970s, Muslim graduates began forming professional organizations. First came the Islamic Medical Association, then the Association of Muslim Scientists and Engineers and the Association of Muslim Social Scientists. Mosques sprang up in large cities.

By 1977, ISNA was born as an umbrella group of student, community and professional organizations.

The 1980s saw an explosion of schools. In 1992, the Council of Islamic Schools in North America started.

Meanwhile, Muslims began organizing politically and demanding civil rights. In 1992, they formed the American Muslim Council.

Now it's time to settle in, said Mr. Abuzaakouk.

The community needs more than mosques and schools, he said. The nation's 1,200 mosques cater primarily to the most devout segment of the Islamic population. Except in large cities, the 200-plus U.S. Muslim schools tend to be part-time efforts.

And all the organizing in the world is fine, but it doesn't allow the typical American Muslim to point to a grand building with a grand purpose and say, "See? That's what Muslims stand for."

One of the first places where such

a grand Muslim plan is taking shape is Leesburg, Va.

There, Muslims have opened their first seminary in America, the School of Islamic and Social Sciences. Situated in an office park near Leesburg Airport, some of the world's foremost Islamic scholars are building an Islam-based liberal arts institution. They are training the first U.S.-educated Muslim chaplains and spiritual leaders, as well as college graduates who simply want a master's in Islamic studies.

"This school is trying to be a bridge between Muslims and the West," said president Taha Jabir Alalwani.

The school is the legacy of the late Isma'il Faruqi, a world-renowned scholar and Pakistani immigrant, who dreamed of a U.S. Islamic university—roughly comparable to the Mormon Church's Brigham Young University and the Christian fundamentalist Bob Jones University. Open since 1996, the school includes 30 immigrant and U.S.-born students.

Back in Texas, Dr. Ahmed is planning a fund-raiser this year—his second so far—so he can buy a building for his community center.



The Dallas Morning News-David Lovell
Dr. Nirmal Saran, of Arlington, (right) puts drops in the eyes of Khaja Ahmed, 50, of Dallas to perform a test for glaucoma at the annual Health Fair sponsored by the Muslim Community Center for Human Services Saturday morning at the North Dallas Community Bible Fellowship. Both men are from India.

"I'm very impressed with the work of the Jewish Community Center and Catholic Charities. They've done tremendous work," he said. "I think that's the real American spirit."