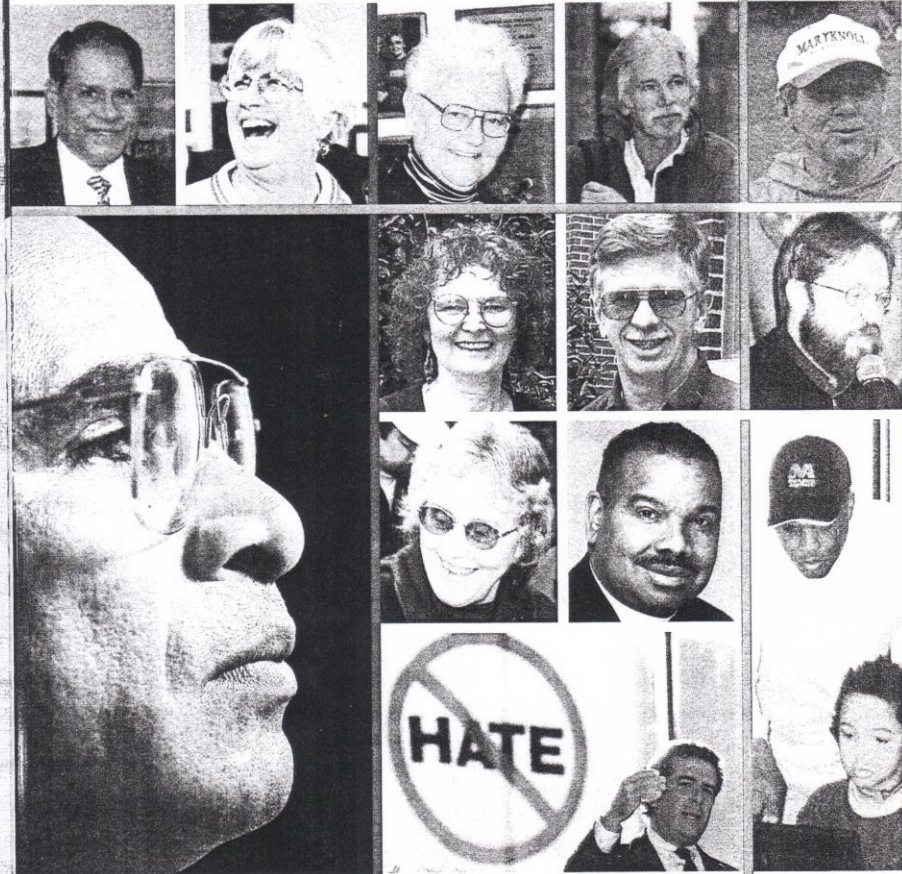


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TODAY'S
FAITH
ACTIVISTS

Mark H. Massé

[11]

DR. M. BASHEER AHMED "MESSENGER
OF GOOD NEWS"



Photo courtesy of The Carter Center, Atlanta, Georgia

Dr. M. Basheer Ahmed is an optimist even in troubled times. (The name Basheer means "messenger of good news.") He had several reasons to feel encouraged through 2003. The Muslim Community Center for Human Services (MCCHS), which he founded in 1995, had hired a part-time administrative assistant—a graduate student from The University of Texas at Arlington School of Social Work. The new hire would help relieve Dr. Ahmed of many of his clerical and

organizational duties, enabling him to concentrate on more strategic planning, program outreach, and public information efforts. In August 2003 he was chair of a regional conference of the Association of Muslim Social Scientists, sponsored by the MCCHS. The conference, "Extremism: A Threat to Global Peace," featured scholars and speakers from universities such as Harvard, Notre Dame, Clarion, Texas Christian, Southern Methodist, Baylor, The University of Texas, and St. Mary's University, Halifax, Nova Scotia. In previous years, Ahmed had organized regional conferences on domestic violence, the role of religion in promoting world peace, and Muslim contributions to human civilization. For months Dr. Ahmed had been busy coordinating the Interfaith Health Fair, hosted by the Muslim Community Center for Human Services, the Richland Hills United Methodist Church, and the Richland Hills Christian Church. St. John the Apostle Catholic Church was one of several cosponsors. The late September 2003 event marked the first time the annual health fair for low-income Muslim community members and other area poor had received such broad-based support and participation from other religious organizations in the North Texas Metroplex. Based on these positive developments, Dr. Ahmed had every reason to be upbeat about the future of the MCCHS and interfaith relations.

DR. M. BASHEER AHMED

Whatever you spend with a good heart, give it to parents, relatives, orphans, the helpless, and travellers in need. Whatever good you do, Allah is aware of it.

—Qur'an 2:[215]

Dr. M. Basheer Ahmed steps lightly but quickly from his office in the compact Al-Shifa Clinic in North Richland Hills, Texas. He tells the other physicians and staff that he is waiting for his final patient of the day, a Muslim woman whose family is caught in the web of domestic violence. She was supposed to be at the clinic an hour ago, but she is lost in the tangled highways and byways of the Dallas–Fort Worth Metroplex. Days earlier she could have blamed a brutal ice storm for her delay, but this spring day is sunny and delightful in North Texas.

Ahmed, a psychiatrist, first spoke with the woman days earlier after she left a message on the twenty-four-hour help line of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services. He recommended she come to the clinic for an intervention. Normally, the clinic closes at 12:30 p.m. on Saturdays, but Dr. Ahmed will keep it open later today, March 8, 2003, until he counsels his client.

This Saturday about fifteen poor and indigent Muslim patients, including elderly, singles, parents, and their children, have visited the medical clinic, housed in one of four 1,200-square-foot suites of a one-story, U-shaped, mission-style brick building. This is the headquarters for the MCCHS, half an hour's drive south of Dallas. Some people have come for their prescriptions for hypertension, others for results of laboratory tests.

A few patients received brief exams for sore throats from Dr. Najam Khan, one of the clinic's rotating pool of seventeen volunteer physicians who donate four hours of Saturday service about every other month. At the Al-Shifa (which means "health" in Arabic) Clinic, patients are not charged for examinations, treatment, or most prescriptions. Once-a-month free diabetes and blood pressure screenings are also conducted on-site. There is a slight charge for off-site diagnostic lab work.

"So many in the Muslim community do not receive medical care because they are poor or intimidated by the health care community," says Dr. Khan, a specialist in internal medicine who has made the fifty-mile drive from Plano this morning. Khan, one of the younger-generation physicians recruited by Dr. Ahmed, says he doesn't mind the drive or the pro bono service. "If I can touch just one life," he says, "I will have succeeded."

Another of Ahmed's recruits is retired surgeon Dr. Siraj Hussain, who supervises the clinic's operation, ensuring that the facilities (two examination rooms, waiting area, dispensary, and offices) are clean, well-equipped, and up to professional standards. The medical equipment, from examination tables to stethoscopes, has been donated by area physicians. Waiting room furniture and clinic bookshelves, file cabinets, and office equipment are also secondhand, but functional. The walls, floors, and mauve carpet are spic-and-span. A faint antiseptic smell hangs in the air.

Dr. Hussain serves on the MCCHS executive/advisory board. Like Dr. Khan, he speaks of the kindness and generosity of Dr. Ahmed, who founded the Muslim Community Center in 1995 and donated a significant portion of the \$50,000 down payment toward the purchase of the approximate \$250,000 building in 2000. Contributions from several members of the Muslim community in the Metroplex provided the balance of building financing.

The highest praise this afternoon comes from another board member and clinic volunteer Mrs. Asli Abada Parker, a Somali émigré who has worked often on community health and service projects with Dr. Basheer Ahmed.

"He's a beautiful gift from God," says Parker, who wears a subdued charcoal-gray floor-length garment and a shoulder-length ivory lace headscarf. For many years, Parker wore her nation's military uniform. She was a colonel who flew jets in the Somali Air Force before coming to America in the 1980s. During the last decade, Parker has worked with thousands of Somali (Muslim) refugees who settled in the region. As president of the Somali Community Relief program in nearby Euless, Texas, Parker oversees employment, legal aid, education, and social services. Before the Al-Shifa Clinic was based in its present location, the MCCHS provided its free Saturday medical clinic services in the Somali Outreach Community Center.

While waiting for his final client of the day (earlier patients were treated for depression and obsessive-compulsive behavior), Dr. Ahmed, dressed in a double-breasted dark gray suit and starched collarless white shirt, chats amiably with Asli Parker. Smiles and laughter punctuate their conversation.

Ahmed speaks in a soft voice that shifts gears from a slow, melodic pace to a near breathless gallop. His dialect reflects his British schooling and South Asian roots (born in India and schooled there, in Pakistan, and in the United Kingdom). Parker's English is spiced with a distinct Mediterranean accent, confirming her many years living in Italy.

Parker, a tall woman with high cheekbones and feline eyes, bears a resemblance to Somali-born model Iman (Mrs. David Bowie). Dr. Ahmed is of medium height and barrel-chested, with a full face and large, kind brown eyes. If the late Winston Churchill was likened to a bulldog, Basheer Ahmed's visage is more akin to a St. Bernard. At almost sixty-eight, he has a full head of ebony hair.

Dr. Ahmed is a steadfast advocate of progressive change. "My profession, community mental health, is involved in social activism, especially as it pertains to serving indigent clientele." His days and evenings are full, given his responsibilities as chairman of the MCCHS, representative on numerous community, civic, and interfaith boards and organizations, and spokesperson for the regional Muslim community, which is estimated at more than one hundred thousand by the Islamic Association of North Texas. In the last year Ahmed has provided his insights to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and he is participating as a faith-based member of the Arlington, Texas, 2025 comprehensive planning process. Dr. Ahmed continues to work as a consulting psychiatrist an average of two days a week, and he also writes and presents academic papers at national and international conferences.

He says that he enjoys his work, and that helps him maintain his enthusiasm. He adds that he inherited his work ethic from his parents; his father, Qameruddin, was an accountant; his mother, Tahira Begum, was a schoolteacher who later became a physician. When asked about his present workload, which averages fifty hours per week, Ahmed says this is down about twenty-five weekly hours from the late 1990s. Just six years ago he was director of the division of psychiatry at the Plaza Medical Center in Fort Worth, an attending psychiatrist at other area hospitals, and founding director of the MCCHS.

His commitment to establish and nurture the Muslim Community Center, the first Muslim social services organization in Texas and one of a handful in the nation, has drawn the admiration of his peers. He was dubbed a "Lone Ranger" in a local newspaper story for his single-handed efforts to provide the Muslim community with needed social services, advocacy on issues such as domestic violence, and representation in the broader community. But Dr. Ahmed is no glory hound. He is characterized as humble, modest, and a "gentleman from the old school" by his fellow MCCHS board members and area professionals, such as Robert Carter, a Fort Worth attorney who has been friends with Ahmed, his wife, Shakila, their son, Sameer, and their daughter, Araj, since shortly after they came

to the Metroplex in 1978. Today, Shakila is a Dallas radiologist, Sameer, a McAllen, Texas, lawyer, and Araj, a law student at American University in Washington, D.C.

Carter says that Dr. Ahmed's goal is to enlighten society about Islam and the Muslim world through his work and interfaith efforts. Ahmed's colleague, board member, and licensed social worker Zeba Salim concurs, noting that Ahmed's faith is expressed through his strong character and charitable service. Salim, who was born in India, was raised in the United Kingdom, and attended The University of Texas at Arlington in the 1980s, says that although Dr. Ahmed's focus has been on the needs of the Muslim population, he is concerned with the community at large.

As chair of a September 2002 regional conference on the "Role of Religion in Promoting World Peace," Dr. Ahmed stated, "The harmony among nations as well as among individuals living in a multi-religious, multi-cultural society can only be achieved through a spirit of tolerance, feelings for other human beings, and sacrifice in the interest of humanity."

Dr. Basheer Ahmed would be the first to remind his friends and admirers of the challenges that lie ahead both for the MCCCHS and for interfaith and intercultural relations in America. The Muslim Community Center has achieved nominal success, but it remains a small-scale operation without full-time staff or a base of funding to achieve longer-term goals such as the establishment of a Muslim women's shelter for victims of domestic violence and a facility to treat emotionally disturbed children. In 1998 Dr. Ahmed and Zeba Salim had submitted a grant proposal to the United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County. They were seeking funding for the MCCCHS to create a model of service patterned after other religious-based organizations such as Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, and Lutheran Social Services.

The proposal, which targeted a needy, under-served Muslim population, was rejected, according to Ahmed, because it was too parochial. Disappointed but resolute, he has since continued to rely on fund-raising dinners and donations of individual Muslims and other contributors, while still planning to seek "outside" organization funding in the future.

Dr. Ahmed and selected members of his board have achieved recognition for community service, such as their sponsorship of annual health fairs that serve hundreds of Muslim and non-Muslim people (providing free physical, dental, and eye exams, pediatric care, cholesterol and blood pressure testing, and health lectures). But even supporters talk about the need for the MCCCHS to secure higher visibility in the community so that the medical and social problems of Muslim Americans will be openly

discussed along with those of other minority groups, such as African Americans and citizens of Hispanic descent.

Dr. Ahmed believes that "there is nothing that can't be resolved with patience, commitment, and faith." But he is no stranger to prejudice or to the damage that can be done to noble causes by fear, ignorance, and hatred. "Before 9/11 we were all just Americans. Now we are Muslims first in many peoples' eyes and Americans second."

He has spoken publicly about the threats to destroy the MCCCHS and the intimidation felt by members of the Muslim community. But he also cites the many supportive calls he has received from longtime residents of the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Ahmed acknowledges that since the tragedy of 9/11, there has been much more pressure on him for interfaith work and for efforts to dispel misconceptions about his religion and culture in one-on-one conversations and in presentations, such as those launched this year titled "Know Your Muslim Neighbor."

Ahmed was one of the organizers of a January 2003 public forum held in a hall adjacent to a Fort Worth Catholic church. He and other Muslim Americans spoke as part of a series planned by the Interfaith Network for Peace and Justice. Ahmed is a member of the Interfaith Network, which was created by the Tarrant Area Community of Churches after 9/11.

At public events Ahmed tries to debunk myths and reveal truths about the Muslim world. For example, most Muslims come from South Asia and Africa, not the Middle East. During Europe's Dark Ages, Islamic scholars such as Avicenna in the eleventh century advanced the world of medicine. Countless other Muslims contributed mightily to discoveries in math, science, and astronomy. Ahmed also highlights commonalities among the world's three major religions, Christianity, Judaism, and Islam: their joint lineage to Abraham, use of much of the same Scripture, and a Muslim's high regard for religious prophets such as Moses, John the Baptist, and Jesus.

Ahmed is pleased to offer insights into Muslim customs. A devout follower of Islam prays five times a day, with Fridays being the holy day. That is when most Muslims attend a mosque, although it is common for Dr. Ahmed to make brief (fifteen- or twenty-minute) visits to one of three local mosques on other days. His routine begins with him leaving his shoes in an outer hallway before entering the main room of the mosque, a place for reverence and reflection. Inside the quiet, carpeted, white-walled room he both stands and kneels in prone position to offer prayers to Allah. He may be joined by just a small group of other worshippers on these weekly visits. On Fridays hundreds are likely to be in the mosque, with women worshipping

separate from the men. Children are expected to be able to read the Arabic text of the Qur'an (Koran) by age eight, and some memorize it entirely by age fourteen (all must memorize key verses by fourteen). While learning the holy book, children sit at the feet of a white-robed imam (prayer leader) in the front of the room near the arch known as the *mahrab* and softly recite their lessons.

Unlike in Christian churches or synagogues, there are no religious statues, symbols, or artifacts in a mosque. The walls are unadorned. In this Arlington mosque where Ahmed prays, a small wooden cart with copies of the Qur'an is near one wall. During the day, light from high windows cascades down on the serene setting.

The majority of Ahmed's audiences have been cordial and appreciative of his lessons, but he recalls one older woman in a recent setting who said, "Oh, why don't all you Muslims just go home." To which the not easily rattled Dr. Ahmed replied: "Ma'am, just like your forefathers didn't want to go home, neither do we. Besides, where would we all go?"

Basheer Ahmed recalls how in 1979 during another Middle East flash point—the Iran hostage crisis—he had been invited to the White House, along with other national Muslim American leaders, by President Jimmy Carter. Ahmed, representing the Islamic Medical Association, met with President Carter and members of his cabinet and advisors. In 2000 he was reunited with the former president and his wife, Rosalynn, at an event at the Carter Center in Atlanta.

The role of problem solver and crisis manager seems to come naturally to Ahmed. According to Dr. Pervaiz Rahman, a senior member of the MCCHS board, "Basheer's reputation was as the trouble-shooter in his family." In 1999 Rahman traveled with Ahmed to his native city of Hyderabad, India, about five hundred miles south of Bombay. He met Ahmed's large extended family, and he was impressed with the tremendous respect they showed him. "He has a God-given ability to encourage people to think, to get involved, and to work toward finding solutions," says Dr. Rahman.

On this Saturday afternoon at the Al-Shifa Clinic, Dr. Ahmed tries to offer hope, if not a solution, to a mother living in an abusive household. Her teenage daughter, who is not with her today, is anxious and depressed, claiming to hear voices. The mother's two adolescent boys wait outside Basheer's office, where Asli Parker engages them in light chatter. At the end of the session, Dr. Ahmed tells the mother he wants to see her and her daughter in a month.

He informed the woman about her options, but he knows he is up against strong cultural, psychological, and social forces. At a February 2001 regional conference on "Domestic Violence—Islamic Perspective," sponsored by the MCCHS, Ahmed and other local and national experts and advocates addressed the issue. In his remarks he said:

Domestic violence is a universal problem. All ethnic, religious, racial, and age groups are affected. Unfortunately, despite Islamic teachings of compassion, justice, and kindness, many Muslim women in the United States experience these tragedies. . . . If religious leaders, health care professionals, and the community at large are not aware and involved, women will remain in the victims' role for many years.

In spring 2003 Dr. Ahmed adds that given the current climate surrounding post-9/11 and reactionary legislation such as the USA Patriot Act, Muslim women are even more intimidated by the idea of contacting police or any government authorities that could result in their husbands being charged with a crime. They are afraid of the ramifications that could affect the freedom of their entire family, and so they choose to suffer in silence.

In a proactive effort related to domestic violence, the Muslim Community Center in 1998 established an Islamic Institute of Human Relations to offer premarital, marriage, and divorce counseling and educational programs to promote strong family relations. Two local imams, including Dr. Yusuf Kavacki, a professor of Islamic law, are religious advisors. Dr. Ahmed is one of five professional advisors.

"What is important to me," says Dr. (Mrs.) Hind Jarrah, "is his continuous recognition of the role of Muslim women in activism, and his insistence on involving women in the organization of his projects."

After saying goodbye to Asli Parker, Basheer Ahmed leaves the clinic after a five-hour Saturday of service. Now at almost 2 P.M., Drs. Ahmed and Hussain travel to a corner fried chicken establishment. Ahmed orders a small bucket and a glass of ice water. He peels away the outer coating before eating his chicken. He admits that as someone who has high cholesterol, doesn't exercise, and is a little overweight, he needs to watch his diet. He offers a short, silent giggle and returns to his meal. His health is no laughing matter to his family and friends. He suffered a major heart attack in 1988 and underwent quadruple bypass surgery. Dr. Ahmed shrugs off the incident, noting that he was back on his demanding schedule within three weeks. He confirms that most days he spends extended periods of time driving his sleek silver Mercedes Benz 500 SL to his many

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appointments. His schedule and the nature of his work don't seem to provide him with time to do more walking. Or so the gentle doctor tells himself.

When lunch is over, he begins to share the story of his multilayered journey: how he became a doctor, a psychiatrist, a community mental health specialist, and an American social activist.

As an immigrant you have to work harder to prove yourself. But America gives you a feeling that you can accomplish so much.

—DR. M. BASHEER AHMED

Ahmed thanks his parents for helping to shape his character, but he was also very much influenced by his uncle Dr. Manan, a well-known physician in Hyderabad, India, who cared for many patients too poor to pay him. Observing his uncle's work, the sensitive nephew developed a deep sense of empathy, which was to be his constant companion throughout his life. Ahmed was also very religious from an early age.

As a Muslim he believed in "Al-Qadar" (which means "divine predestination"): Whatever God wills to happen will happen. But he was also taught to believe that God had given human beings a free will, the ability to choose right or wrong. Ahmed had a strong conscience from boyhood on. He knew that he was responsible for his choices and that he would ultimately be held accountable for actions in his lifetime.

Ahmed says his interest in psychological matters dates back to high school. "I seemed to be more interested in human issues, problems. My friends and I would talk about family issues. I had a natural inclination to listen. At that time I didn't know there was a specialty named psychiatry."

Ahmed received his B.S. degree from Osmania University in his hometown in 1954. He then attended Dow Medical College at Karachi University in Pakistan. "Once I left home for medical school in Pakistan," he recalls, "my ego strength took over. I saw what I could achieve." He was planning on specializing in internal medicine until one of his professors returned from the United Kingdom with advanced psychiatric training. Up to that point, Ahmed's exposure to the subject had consisted of a few dusty lectures on depression and dementia. Upon graduation from medical school and with the recommendation of his professor-mentor, Ahmed traveled to Glasgow University, Scotland, where he received postgraduate training in psychiatry.

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"There was tremendous competition for a foreign-trained doctor to go into a professional unit," Ahmed says. He received the distinction of being assigned to the psychiatric unit of a hospital's acute care ward, when most of his international contemporaries were assigned to work in mental hospitals. In 1964 the Royal College of Physicians and Royal College of Surgeons, London, Edinburgh, and Glasgow, U.K., named him a diplomate in psychiatry. A decade later he would be named a fellow of those institutions as well as the American Psychiatric Association. Dr. Ahmed credits his education in England and Scotland with introducing him to pioneering work in the therapeutic community mental health movement. Back then the United States lagged behind the United Kingdom in innovative approaches to mental health issues. In the early 1960s, during the Kennedy administration, the emphasis was shifting to mass deinstitutionalization of mental patients. For years U.S. communities wrestled with the issue of whom to release, when, and with what support services and safeguards.

In 1968 the St. Louis (Missouri) State Hospital Complex was looking for a progressive clinical director to institute change in mental health patient policies. Dr. Basheer Ahmed was seeking an opportunity to put his ideas into action. "He is representative of what the late President Kennedy called 'a bold new approach' to psychiatry," was how a profile in a state hospital publication described its new director of Unit One in the fall of 1968.

The article explained Dr. Ahmed's philosophy of treatment that featured the patient as a working member of a mental health team. Another innovation implemented by Dr. Ahmed was greater use of group therapy in order to prepare patients for functioning as members of social units (e.g., in a family or home environment, at work, or in day-to-day living) when discharged from the hospital. "The reaction of the staff to these innovations has been extremely cooperative," Dr. Ahmed reported. The publication also mentioned that just before coming to the United States, Dr. Ahmed had married his wife, Shakila. Theirs had been an arranged marriage, according to Indian custom. Shakila was also an M.D., and her sister was a practicing physician in St. Louis when the young couple arrived.

Three years later in March 1971, Basheer Ahmed was featured in a long article by Gerald J. Meyer of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*. The story documented how under Ahmed's direction Unit One had reduced its patient population from five hundred to less than one hundred.

More important was how he transformed the unit—from providing essentially custodial care to implementing psychiatry in a therapeutic

community setting where patients had a role in decision making. The article also described how Ahmed, "without additional funding from the county or state governments," opened a neighborhood-based mental health clinic in the Kinloch Community Center in north St. Louis County, a largely black urban environment. Dr. Ahmed explained that this preventive psychiatry was designed to serve people in their community rather than removing them for treatment.

When Ahmed confronted racial tension in the community, he couldn't relate to the animosity and polarized attitudes. In his extended family in India, his relatives' skin colors range from fair to bronze to black. As a psychiatrist he was also colorblind. "People's problems are people's problems, regardless of race or ethnicity."

As a pioneer in the mental health community in St. Louis, Dr. Ahmed, according to the 1971 newspaper article, insisted that "psychiatric help must be an accepted part of 'comprehensive community health care,' and that his staff of three doctors, six social workers, two psychologists, one occupational therapist and two vocational rehabilitation specialists operate in cooperation with other agencies." He also created six-month courses on mental health for public health nurses throughout the county. The newspaper article quoted the director of the State Division of Mental Health, Dr. George A. Ulett, who called Ahmed's work with Unit One "in the best tradition of community mental health." At the close of the article, Dr. Ahmed sounded ever the visionary, stating his belief that programs like his would become the wave of the future in psychiatry. Reflecting on his work in St. Louis, Ahmed says he is proud of his contributions, adding ironically, "I wasn't the Muslim doctor then, just the doctor."

Basheer Ahmed continues to be a strategic thinker. He advises members of his board and his fellow community activists that proposed programs should be "doable, achievable, and sustainable." He has applied that formula to his efforts through the years. He has also used that same type of thinking in laying out a career path. Each move, each job was carefully planned to generate specific results.

In mid-1971, at the height of his success in St. Louis, he accepted a position in New York City as director of the Sound View-Throgs Neck Community Mental Health Center, affiliated with the Albert Einstein College of Medicine, where the thirty-six-year-old Ahmed would serve as assistant professor of psychiatry, his first academic appointment. He said it was difficult leaving St. Louis, where his staff gave him a teary-eyed fare-

well. But in his best paraphrase of Frank Sinatra, Dr. Ahmed says, "If you can work in New York, you can work anywhere."

In New York, Ahmed learned the history of how poor and indigent immigrant groups had struggled for education, employment, health care, and social services throughout the twentieth century. He noted how organizations such as Jewish Family Services and Jewish community centers had developed in response to the needs of religious and cultural minorities who had been subjected to prejudice and discrimination. Years later he would draw on those experiences when creating the concept of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services.

From 1971 until 1976, Dr. Ahmed developed community mental health programs for treatment of acutely ill patients, for comprehensive rehabilitation of non-acute patients, and for decentralized preventive mental health care in the field. He was also teaching psychiatry as a member of the faculty at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York. ("And I wasn't even Jewish," Ahmed jokes thirty years later.) He and Shakila lived in New Rochelle, about twenty miles north of New York City. The Ahmeds were first-time parents, raising their son, Sameer.

The scenario seemed satisfactory on many fronts. But Basheer Ahmed's career clock was ticking. He realized that to become a full professor at Albert Einstein College, he would have to spend several years conducting basic theoretical research to bolster his credentials. Dr. Ahmed was capable of such research, but it was not his priority. His focus was on applied research. He felt he couldn't afford to spend more years in New York. An entrepreneurial opportunity was calling at a new medical school in Dayton, Ohio. The Ahmeds were on the move again.

In 1976 Dr. Ahmed became a full professor of psychiatry at the Wright State University School of Medicine. He was simultaneously serving as chief of psychiatry at the Dayton, Ohio, Veterans Administration Hospital. The work was rewarding, but he and Shakila felt increasingly lonely and isolated in southwestern Ohio, where there was a small Muslim population, and winters were marked by dreary days and frequent ice storms. Two years later, Ahmed was again scanning the horizon for his next position. The choice would come down to Los Angeles, where he had a pending offer to join the UCLA Medical School, or the Dallas-Fort Worth, Texas, area, with its solid reputation for health care institutions.

In 1978 Dr. Ahmed began a four-year stint as director of the department of psychiatry at the John Peter Smith Hospital in Fort Worth, Texas. During that time he also served as professor of psychiatry, community

medicine, and family practice at The University of Texas Health Science Center in Dallas. The Ahmeds found the weather in North Texas more to their liking, and they were comfortable as members of a growing Muslim community.

Over the next two decades, Basheer Ahmed distinguished himself as a medical director, a chief of staff, and chair of continued medical education at institutes, medical centers, and hospitals throughout the region. His reputation as an adult and adolescent psychiatrist grew, with a successful private practice, first in Fort Worth and later in Arlington, where he and his family relocated in 1993. Shakila Ahmed also found success in North Texas as a radiologist at the Dallas Veterans Affairs Hospital and in her own practice. She was profiled in the media as a thoroughly modern woman in dress and liberated spirit. In one account, she told a reporter for the *Dallas Morning News*, "I'm able to do anything as well as a man."

Reflecting on his thirty-five-year career in community mental health, Basheer Ahmed is openly patriotic. He says that this country can give a person what no other country can: opportunity. "There is freedom of achievement, not just freedom of expression, in the U.S."

The Ahmeds live in a stunning home on two-plus acres in a gated estate in Arlington, Texas. The two-story house features glistening Italian marble floors and a sweeping staircase that could rival Scarlett O'Hara's. The home has hosted sit-down dinners for more than two hundred guests. But all who know the Ahmeds praise the couple for their humility and genuine regard for others.

"They go out of their way to make you feel comfortable," says Zeba Salim.

Although Basheer Ahmed wasn't raised with wealth, he typifies the concept of "noblesse oblige," whereby the affluent of society feel a responsibility to aid the poor, whether through making generous gifts to charity or by donating time to worthy causes. "This country had been good to me, and I wanted to pay it back with service to the community," he says. In Ahmed's case, he has spent years responding to the needs of the less fortunate with significant financial contributions, time, and effort to establish the Muslim Community Center.

"My Islamic teachings took root in America," he says, reciting passages from the Qur'an that address one's need to perform acts of charity (*Zakat*) and service to others.

Dr. Ahmed may have been called a "Lone Ranger" in a newspaper story, but he knew it was vital to the success of his plans to have supportive community leadership. In forming the MCCCHS he secured the participation of thirty Muslim doctors, educators, professionals, and religious lead-

ers from North Texas to serve on an initial advisory council. A smaller group would later form the executive/advisory board. What had launched the idea for a multipurpose community center was an influx in 1994 of Bosnian, Somali, and Kurdish Muslim immigrants to the Metroplex. Many were poor and lacking in basic services, notably medical care. Dr. Ahmed and his colleagues spent the next decade implementing a series of community-based responses.

In July 1995 the MCCCHS was incorporated; nonprofit tax-exempt status would be secured months later. The first public event was a health fair designed for the Muslim population, but open to the entire community. More than five hundred people attended, and some thirty physicians and nurses from area hospitals donated equipment, supplies, and services. The annual health fair concept would become one of the staples for the Muslim Community Center, and another source for interfaith cooperation with area churches.

In November 1995, two hundred guests attended a fund-raising dinner at a convention center. Those who came to show their support for the MCCCHS included the chair of the Texas Republican party, a judge, a county commissioner, and the president of the Jewish Federation of Fort Worth and Tarrant County. Media coverage followed. "His dream to build a Muslim Community Center for Human Services has met all the challenges. . . . He is determined to do it, and he will do it," wrote Aboobaker Ebrahim in the November 23, 1995, edition of the *Asian News*.

In January 1996 the MCCCHS launched a twenty-four-hour help line/telephone counseling service. The Al-Shifa Clinic opened in October 1998. The Islamic Institute of Human Relations (providing marital and divorce counseling) was also formed in 1998.

The North Richland Hills headquarters building for the MCCCHS (and the medical clinic) was purchased in 2000. Soon the mainstream Texas media had taken notice of Ahmed and his work with the Muslim Community Center. Patrick McGee of the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* wrote of Dr. Ahmed's work in providing basic needs for area Muslims in a July 23, 2001, article: "The problems are the same, but the services are not the same," Ahmed said, "explaining that Muslims need social services delivered in culturally sensitive ways. "That is the driving philosophy behind the Muslim Community Center for Human Services, which was founded by Ahmed and other Muslim professionals six years ago when the Metroplex was receiving Muslim refugees from Bosnia, Somalia and Iraq."

In 2001 and 2002 the Muslim Community Center sponsored regional conferences on domestic violence (in cooperation with The University of

Texas at Arlington School of Social Work), Muslim contributions to human civilization, and the role of religion in promoting world peace, featuring Muslim speakers from across the country.

In 2003 the "Know Your Muslim Neighbor" forums were launched, but a more ambitious community outreach program was underway. On Sunday, March 9, Dr. Ahmed and his executive/advisory board met at the Haveli Pakistani restaurant in Irving, Texas, to discuss their plans for the new program. There would be discussion about interfaith cooperation, sensitivity training, and public information campaigns. But two important questions about the future of the MCCHS could also be answered at that meeting: Would other Muslim community members step forward and take responsibility for programs such as the outreach effort? And could the popular leader Basheer Ahmed loosen his grip on the reins of the organization he had founded more than eight years earlier?

That's what we do in this country. We put our energies together to serve humanity.

—DR. M. BASHEER AHMED

Dr. Ahmed likes to run an efficient meeting. After a pleasant back-room brunch of seasoned, aromatic South Asian food, a "token" platter of scrambled eggs, and pitchers of hot tea sweetened with sugar and cream, Ahmed and his board are ready to work their way through the eleven-point agenda (with attachments), which had been typed and photocopied by Ahmed earlier this morning. The MCCHS has no clerical staff. As Ahmed states, "If I don't work hard, the Muslim Community Center will disappear."

The meeting begins with a recitation from the Qur'an led by Dr. Yusuf Kavakci, a resident scholar imam of the Islamic Association of North Texas and an advisor to the MCCHS. The opening prayer talks of peace, which appears to bring comfort to the gathering, who moments earlier had shared their concerns over the pending Iraq war.

The minutes from the prior month's meeting are approved, and then discussion shifts to building management and maintenance items at the headquarters' site in North Richland Hills. A roof repair estimate of \$12,000 has been received. Dr. Ahmed says that more donations may have to be solicited to make the necessary repairs.

Item number six is the outreach program. At the February meeting Dr. Ahmed had said how essential it was for the Muslim Community Center to participate in community-based charitable programs in Tarrant County.

He outlined three program objectives: increasing Muslim representation, participation, and contribution to social services in Arlington; providing services to needy individuals (irrespective of religion, race, or ethnicity) directly or through other institutions; and building coalitions with other social service organizations in the area. He then established a subcommittee to organize the program, asking Mr. Ismail Tahir and Mr. Aftab Siddiqui to co-chair the effort. Now he waits for their report.

Tahir, a certified public accountant, is as reserved as Siddiqui, an operations planner for American Airlines, is animated. One wonders if Ahmed chose the men for the contrasting, and perhaps complementary, styles. Speaking slowly and clearly, Tahir first announces that more than thirty people attended a volunteer meeting on March 1 at the Arlington Central Library. From that group, a six-person committee was formed to identify a list of twenty-two potential projects for the MCCHS outreach program. As the group reads through the list, Siddiqui reminds them in a high-pitched rapid-fire voice of the need to build a continuous presence for the Muslim Community Center in Arlington. Dr. Ahmed and others stress the importance of prioritizing the potential projects list (e.g., food drives, school seminars, library displays of Islam, Earth Day participation, and partnerships with women's and homeless shelters). Tahir nods, and he and Siddiqui inform the group that they will meet with the committee of volunteers and narrow the list to two or three potential projects by the next meeting.

In the past, Dr. Ahmed might well have made the decision on his own because of a lack of time or commitment from other board members. But he has delegated this assignment, and he will let the two men fulfill their responsibilities—though he will certainly monitor their progress.

He will later tell Zeba Salim that he was very pleased with the initiative shown by Tahir and Siddiqui, and with progress to broaden the base of involvement in the MCCHS. By the next board meeting, Ahmed will have learned that the Muslim Community Center's outreach program has become a partner with the Arlington Life Shelter, a public facility for area homeless, and MCCHS volunteers will be scheduled for monthly service activities at the shelter.

The last agenda item at the Sunday, March 9, 2003, executive/advisory board meeting is United Way. Dr. Ahmed, who was the first Muslim in the Metroplex to serve as a committee member of United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County, announces that he is participating in a review of grant applications. He again discusses the need for a social worker to help the MCCHS write grant proposals for philanthropic organizations, such as

United Way, foundations, and government funding sources. There is brief discussion by the group, but no recommendations on how to proceed. Dr. Ahmed says that until the Muslim Community Center is able to secure grants, it will have to continue to depend on donations and fund-raising dinners.

It has been nearly five years since Ahmed and board member Zeba Salim had first sought United Way funding. When their proposal was unsuccessful, Ahmed confided that he "allowed himself" to be disappointed, to feel sad and hurt for forty-eight hours. But then he "got over it," and it was time to reflect on his best options for the future. He decided that he needed to know more about how United Way operated. He sought out opportunities to get involved, using his community experience and reputation as a psychiatrist in the Metroplex.

About three years ago, he was invited to become a member of the Families Way Impact Council (FWIC) of United Way of Metropolitan Tarrant County, joining twenty-four other representatives from business, education, government, and the religious community. As a member of the FWIC, Ahmed has participated in funding decisions for organizations such as Catholic Charities, Jewish Family Services, and the Salvation Army. This past year, Dr. Ahmed played a lead role in recommending that the FWIC target child abuse and neglect as its priority social issue. In addition to gaining more exposure for the MCCCHS, Ahmed's participation with United Way gives him greater confidence for new fund-raising strategies, if and when the Muslim Community Center decides to submit another grant proposal.

When asked about the future of the MCCCHS, Dr. Ahmed dismisses any talk of his succession. "Right now my focus is on finding a social worker/coordinator to assist the Muslim Community Center." One intermediate option being considered is the hiring of a part-time administrative assistant. Ahmed does allow himself to speculate on the future of social activism in the Muslim community in North Texas and nationally.

He is encouraged by the potential of the younger generation. He singles out Zeba Salim, the dynamic social worker, who has been a valuable member of the MCCCHS board since 1996. Another woman who has impressed Ahmed with her commitment to Muslim causes is Shanaz Arjumand from New York City.

A fifteen-year veteran of the health care industry, Arjumand has been working after-hours and on weekends for two years to conduct research on low-income Muslim populations in New York. She hopes to use her re-

search to launch a citywide community education program to raise people's awareness of available medical and social services. Recently she and Ahmed had dinner when Arjumand was in Dallas on business. Although the focus of their work differed—the MCCCHS is a clinic model, and Arjumand considers hers a network model—the two social activists agreed their missions were aligned: to provide the Muslim American community with improved access to resources.

Another bright light on the national scene, according to Ahmed, is a recent Harvard graduate named Zayed Yasin. In his 2002 commencement speech, which was reprinted by the Association of Muslim Social Scientists in the September 28, 2002, program ("Role of Religion in Promoting World Peace"), Yasin explained the correct definition of a *jihad*. He said:

It is a word that has been corrupted and misinterpreted, both by those who do and do not claim to be Muslims, and we saw last fall, to our great national and personal loss, the results of this corruption. Jihad, in its truest and purest form, the form to which all Muslims aspire, is the determination to do right, to do justice even against your own interests. It is an individual struggle for personal moral behavior.

Basheer Ahmed says that this outstanding Ivy League graduate is forgoing any immediate career decisions to spend two years involved in community service work. Now if only Zayed Yasin wanted to come to Texas. Imagine such a committed young man working for the Muslim Community Center. Dr. Basheer Ahmed appears to file that idea away along with the many he carries with him these very busy days.