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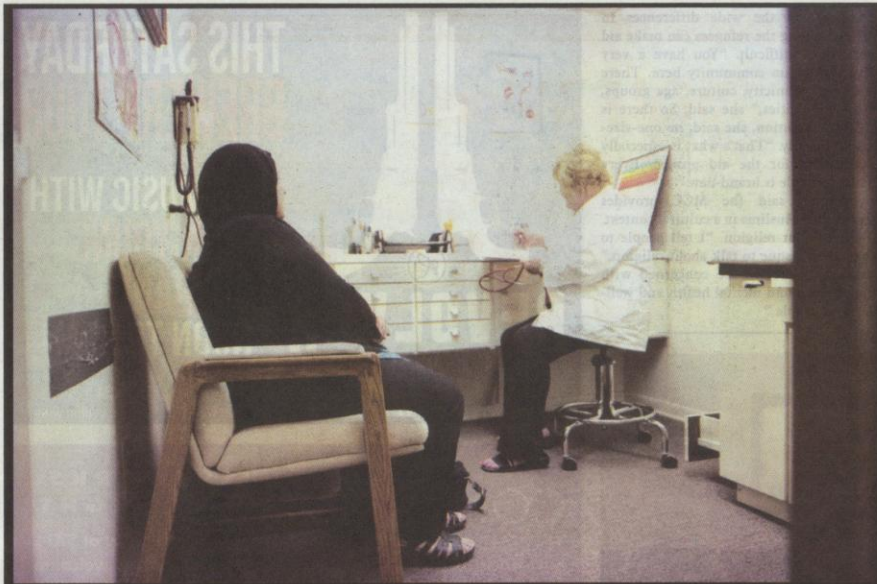
Touching Lives

From a single phone line, Basheer Ahmed began building a major institution in North Texas' Muslim community.

BY ANNABELLE MASSEY MALLOY

METRO | TransCanada contractors are busy replacing a lot of new-laid pipe. BY PETER GORMAN

MUSIC | Two more luminaries for the virtual Music Hall of Fame. BY JIMMY FOWLER AND ANTHONY MARIANI



Nurse practitioner Sandra Pinkston talks with a patient at the Al-Shifa clinic.

women who are reluctant to share their domestic-violence situations. And she reaches out to law enforcement, offering sensitivity training about the Muslim culture. When there is a referral about a situation of family violence, Almahzoumi goes to the home or meets the woman in a private place.

"In the Muslim community, it's not so obvious that a woman is being hurt by her husband," she said. "We do not see bruises

or black eyes, for example. What we see most often are broken fingers or broken toes." There is a tendency in Muslim families to tolerate abuse, she said.

"They don't think they can leave," Almahzoumi said. "In the immigrant community, there is rarely any type of extended family support, because the rest of the family may not be here." Adding to the difficulties are language barriers. "These women don't know whom to call if they can't speak English, and they are very frightened," she said.

"Very soon after these refugees come in, the domestic violence numbers go very high very fast," she said. The stranger-in-a-strange-land dynamic exacerbates marital and family stress. "These women are asking why the husband has brought them here, how they are expected to function before they learn to speak English, and, in fact, how are they going to learn?" she said. "They are very torn. If they talk with their families on Skype, they are implored to return, to bring the kids back. It's not a good situation."

Salem said issues of family violence are cultural rather than religious. "Religiously, it's not allowed for men to beat up their wives," she said. "It is sometimes a cultural norm, though. That's a clash of two worlds."



In 1995 Ahmed began the effort that would become the Muslim Community Center for Human Services.

Ahmed has seen a lot of places in the world and a lot of changes. "As early as

"I don't ever want to retire."

I can remember, my mother taught me to respect ... all human beings," he said. He grew up in Hyderabad, India, where mosques and Hindu temples stand in close proximity. He lived through the time of Gandhi and saw an independent India emerge from British rule.

One of his uncles was a doctor. "He lived to be 95. He was not only a great physician but a great activist," Ahmed said. "When he saw that people had no money, he stopped taking fees and even gave money to some of his patients. This made a tremendous impression on me. I always looked toward him as a mentor."

Ahmed got his college education in Karachi, Pakistan, and Glasgow, Scotland. He came to the United States 35 years ago to teach psychiatry at Missouri University's St. Louis campus and to serve as medical director at the St. Louis State Hospital.

In addition to his longtime practice as a board-certified psychiatrist, he has taught as an assistant professor at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, New York, and as a professor at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School in Dallas. A past president of the Islamic Medical Association of North America, Ahmed and his wife, Shakila, also a physician, have a son and a daughter, both successful corporate attorneys.

Ahmed is a prolific essayist, sharing his thoughts with an extensive e-mail list. His medical papers and advocacy reports have been widely published. World peace is a frequent topic.

"I'll tell you what that is going to take," he said, leaning forward across his desk. "The key to world peace is successful dialogue, not war. The success of that dialogue will be if you lower your ego a little bit, and if you are willing to give up a little something."

He received the Dallas Peace Center's Peacemaker of the Year award in December — the most recent in a string of honors recognizing his community service and humanitarian work. The Tarrant County Medical Society named Ahmed its "Physician Humanitarian of the Year" in 2008.

"Every one of these is a very great honor," he said. "I measure my success by the ability to touch even one life, to improve even one person's quality of life."

Vora, the Arlington doctor, called Ahmed "a champion of people in need. A lifetime of experience has prepared him to be effective. He truly says to himself and to others, 'Hey! Let's make this world a better place.'"

Ahmed serves on the board of the Multicultural Alliance of Fort Worth; he speaks each year at the Interfaith Seminary Retreat. The retreat gathers representatives from 18 Christian seminaries in Texas — both Catholic and Protestant — as well as Jewish religious students.

"He's a wonderful person to reach across all different faiths," Dr. Cheryl Kimberling, president of the Multicultural Alliance, said. "He does a nice job of bringing people together."

Even though he has retired from his practice, Ahmed said he will never retire from the rest of his life's work. "For years, when I turned 50 and beyond, I always lectured about how to survive healthily in old age," he said. "You must continue some kind of work. You must have something to live for."

Noting Ahmed's long resume of humanitarian work, Kimberling said, "Basheer's retirement would be most people's full-time jobs."

North Texas freelance writer Annabelle Massey Malloy can be reached at annabellemm@sbcglobal.net.

in the community that our clients may need,” Fanta said. Social workers know the ins and outs of accessing private and government assistance programs to solve immediate, fundamental needs — housing, healthcare, nutrition, child care. Fanta is adept at handling domestic violence cases. “I started my career at SafeHaven of Tarrant County,” she said.

MCC Program Coordinator Talauna Thompson is an Ohio native who came to North Texas to study at the University of Texas at Arlington. She holds a master’s degree in social work and is responsible for day-to-day management of the organization. She’s a dead ringer for supermodel Tyra Banks, a fact that doesn’t quite jibe with her executive

She said the wide differences in culture among the refugees can make aid work more difficult. “You have a very diverse Muslim community here. There is diverse ethnicity, culture, age groups, and nationalities,” she said. So there is no single solution, she said, no one-size-fits-all remedy. “That’s what is especially challenging for the aid groups. Every issue we tackle is brand-new.”

Ahmed said the MCC provides services for Muslims in a cultural context. It’s not about religion. “I tell people to go to the mosque to talk about religion,” he said. “Here we are concerned with the physical and mental health and well-being of people.”



A patient checks out at the MCC clinic with her young daughter. The center helps Muslim families with everything from dental care to referrals for social services.

demeanor and ready suggestions during the meeting.

“We serve all of Dallas and Fort Worth, and it’s a challenge to get the word out about what we do,” Thompson said. “I give educational presentations in all sorts of places where we know there are people who need help.” The MCC uses Funasia, a South Asian ethnic radio station, to announce events and programs.

Thompson makes informal speeches at area mosques. “We get a lot of calls after each program,” she said — potential volunteers, potential clients, women who call to talk about domestic abuse. “Women will say, ‘This is happening to me,’ or tell me it is happening to their daughters,” she said.

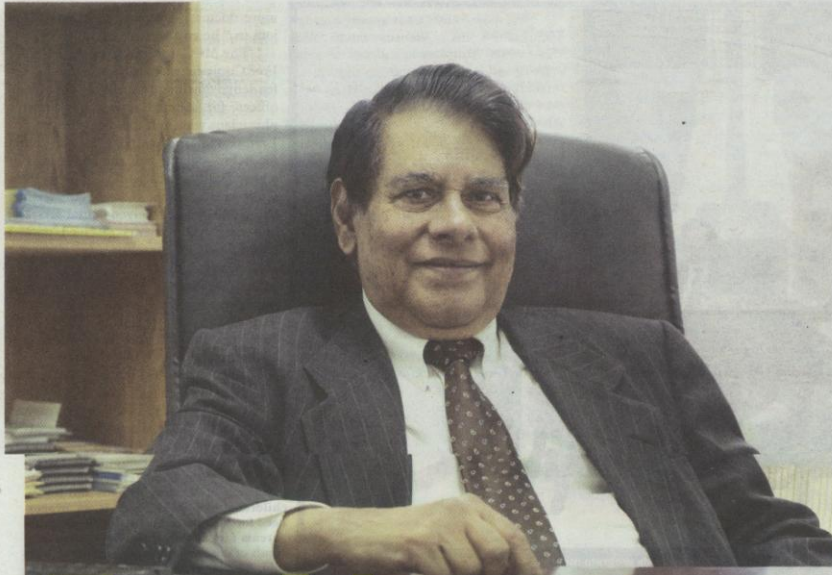
Salem, the liaison to Baitulmaal, grew up in Southwest Fort Worth, the daughter of an Egyptian immigrant father and a seventh-generation Texan mother. She says she has “two sides of my identity,” with Muslim family on her father’s side and Protestant relatives on her mother’s. Her mother converted to Islam when she married.

MCC is seeing a growing number of women clients who are dealing with domestic violence, Ahmed said, so the staff has increased efforts to network with nine women’s shelters in the Metroplex, as well as with local law enforcement.

“We just received a federal grant for three years to train volunteers to identify and help women in our community,” Ahmed said. A big part of his work involves securing grants and other fundraising activities to keep the clinic and other MCC activities going.

“Domestic violence is an issue among women, period,” Salem said. “The problem in the Muslim community is it’s not really talked about. I think it’s all of a sudden a hot topic because it hasn’t been talked about or dealt with.”

Nehu Almkhazoumi works as the center’s outreach coordinator and specializes in finding help for women suffering from domestic violence. A native of Jordan, Almkhazoumi is fluent in English and Arabic. She takes MCC’s message to the streets, visiting Muslim



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BY ANNABELLE MASSEY MALLOY
PHOTOS BY ADRIEN P. MARONEY

It started with a phone line in his garage.

Or more accurately, with a phone call from a charity that led Dr. Basheer Ahmed to get the new line installed, along with an answering machine.

"An organization called World Vision contacted me," Ahmed recalled. The year was 1995, and Muslim refugees were pouring into North Texas from Bosnia, part of the human flood escaping the genocide being carried out by Bosnian Serbs, following the breakup of Yugoslavia.

World Vision was looking for someone who could help Muslim refugees

find medical care in the Fort Worth area and help them get acclimated to a new country. Many of them didn't speak the language, were frightened of the governmental process, and knew little about the culture.

"Imagine that you have been living in the extreme stress and danger of war," Ahmed said. "While there is immense relief in getting to America and out of the crisis, you know nothing about this country. Nothing about transportation, learning to drive, enrolling your children in schools, navigating a grocery store. You have no doctor, no dentist, no extended

family, no mosque or church. It's very difficult."

Ahmed, a psychiatrist who had emigrated from India in 1968, was bewildered at the idea of finding all those kinds of help for people. But he felt that he had to try.

"I knew how much good was being done by organizations such as Catholic Charities and Jewish Community Services," he said. "I knew there was no similar group to address the unique issues of the Muslim community."

He began working his network to figure out who could help with what. He

talked to local physicians, members of his mosque, family, and friends.

And so he had the phone line installed in the garage of his Arlington home and found volunteers to answer it. It was his first attempt at a local Muslim community hotline, a single place where members of his faith could go to find all kinds of help.

From that phone line sprouted the Muslim Community Center for Human

"He is a champion of people in need."

Services. Now, 18 years and many honors later, the center occupies four suites of offices in a Fort Worth suburb. Last year volunteers with MCC, as many in the community refer to it, provided medical, dental, counseling, and mental health care to several thousand people. Along the way, the center has become a key resource for Muslims who are victims of domestic violence in a culture that makes it particularly difficult for abused women to seek help.

Ahmed, now 76, recently retired from private practice and is devoting most of his time to the nonprofit he founded.

"He is a champion of people in need," Dr. Hujefa Vora said of his longtime colleague. "He is just hitting his prime." Vora is the past president of the Arlington Medical Society and a regular volunteer at the clinic.

"My motivation for creating this organization was threefold," Ahmed said in his British-Indian accent. "My feelings for helping people, my upbringing that engendered respect and compassion for the human condition, and" — he broke into a grin — "my own selfishness. I don't ever want to retire. I always want to help people."

Around a table in a nondescript but pleasant room, four people have gathered for their weekly meeting about programs and problems at the MCC. Originally from India, Ethiopia, Jordan, and the United States, all are U.S. citizens. Together they represent the leadership of the MCC, the breadth of the community



Left to right, Almahzoumi, Ahmed, Fanta, and Thompson gather for their weekly program meeting at the MCC.

they serve, and the pressures that have brought successive waves of Muslim immigrants to the community in the last two decades.

The Metroplex first became a significant resettlement area for Muslim refugees from the war in Bosnia beginning

in 1995. A decade later, another war, this one in Somalia, produced another group of Muslim refugees. Then in 2009, Kurds seeking refuge from fighting and oppression in Iran began to arrive in North Texas. The refugees joined a growing and increasingly diverse Muslim community, both those born in this country and immigrants from all over South Asia, Africa, and elsewhere.

Between 1983 and 2004, according to the U.S. Office of Refugee Resettlement, about a third of the 34,000 refugees who

arrived in Fort Worth were Muslims. The agency tries to place refugees in many parts of the country to even out the burden on local agencies. But refugees are also settled near relatives already established, which means that refugee communities often grow around a nucleus.

The federal government decides whether to grant refugee status for those who apply to resettle here. Refugees receive some government help, but private, nonprofit, and often religious organizations are essential to ease the process. Both public and private agencies help new arrivals to find housing, learn about life and customs here, secure jobs, learn English, and eventually become citizens. The inability to navigate a "foreign" system to meet their most basic needs is the perennial stumbling block.

Ahmed said the goal of the center's humanitarian work is to ease transitions from native homeland to adopted country. He's a soft-spoken, articulate man with mahogany-colored skin who looks much younger than he is. Educated in Pakistan and Scotland, he came to this country to teach and practice psychiatry and became a U.S. citizen in 1975.

"Sometimes, adjusting begins with the basics," he said. "People in our community who have resettled from Muslim countries have difficulty with the English language or in finding someone to translate for them. Even [some of] those who have lived here for many years still cannot speak English.

"Only 25 percent of our patients are American-born," Ahmed said.

Refugees also sometimes find it difficult to get employers and others to understand their need to attend religious services each Friday, the Muslim holy day.

He said the MCC is struggling to find female physicians to volunteer at the health clinic. "Women in the Muslim culture do not want to expose any part of their bodies to men," he said. Female doctors now see patients on two Sundays each month. "We are hoping to encourage

more doctors — female and male — to join us," he said.

The MCC now includes the Al-Shifa Free Clinic for medical care, a low- or no-fee dental office, and a small suite of private offices for Ahmed and the volunteer physicians who staff the medical services. Last year more than 6,000 people called for help — about half the client load of a busy family practice office. The medical clinic treated more than 2,000 patients, about 300 people received dental services, and nearly 400 clients received mental health care, counseling, or domestic violence services. The Al-Shifa (the name means "healing place" in Arabic) has 27 volunteer physicians on staff, representing various medical specialties. They come from private practices in Fort Worth, Arlington, and the Mid-Cities.

Alia Salem is office manager of a nonprofit relief organization — Baitulmaal — that coordinates services with MCC. She explained that the MCC and the second group provide another critical service in the community. "MCC helps us with short-term, emergency placement of Muslim orphans and foster children," she said. There is an urgent need for Muslim families to serve as foster parents for Muslim children — often as a result of domestic violence situations, she said. "Social services within the Muslim community are just starting to take off,"

Salem said. "These family issues are just starting to be recognized, so the services are more crucial."

Selenat Fanta, the youngest person at the MCC conference table, is a social worker with a master's degree who grew up in Ethiopia. Her job is to find resources to provide a range of medical and social services. She speaks English and Amharik, an Ethiopian language.

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