

Muslim helps others handle backlash

Tragedy motivates center founder to raise awareness about Islam

By LINDA JONES
Staff Writer

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So, when terrorists claiming to be Muslims attacked on Sept. 11, the Arlington psychiatrist was not surprised at the backlash that he

received.

"The first few days we got very bad calls," said the soft-spoken director and founder of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services. "There were threats. They said they would destroy us."

While no harm came to the center or to Dr. Ahmed, the tragedy has prompted him to spend more time raising awareness about his religion and reassuring his clients who fear discrimination and violence that things will be OK.

"I'm not a priest, I'm a psychiatrist," he told a gathering last

month during a luncheon at the Grand Prairie Women's Club. The predominately white organization of mainly Christian women invited him to offer insight into Islam.

Dr. Ahmed said he was not there to preach about his religion but to educate. He explained the religious tenets and traditions of Islam and made a point to dissociate Islam from the Sept. 11 tragedy.

"Whatever happened with the terrorist act has nothing to do with the religion," he said.

He also tried to dispel misperceptions, particularly about mar-

riage and the treatment of women. The presence of his wife Shakila, a doctor, who accompanied him dressed in a navy blue business suit with her head uncovered, seemed to underscore his statement that Islam isn't as rigid as some perceive it to be.

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See CENTER Page 4Y



REX CURRY/Special Contributor

Basheer Ahmed established the Muslim Community Center for Human Services six years ago. Lately, many of his clients are worried about being harassed because of their Islamic faith.

Doctor relishes talking about Islam

Director of Muslim services center hopes to dispel misconceptions

By LINDA JONES
Arlington Bureau

GRAND PRAIRIE — As a Muslim of Indian descent, Basheer Ahmed is no stranger to acts of prejudice by people who are ignorant about his culture and his religion.

So, when extremists attacked the United States on Sept. 11, the Arlington psychiatrist was not surprised at the backlash that he encountered.

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Public outreach

Dr. Ahmed, who came to the United States from India in 1968, says he relishes opportunities like the one in Grand Prairie to teach people about Islam and help break down cultural barriers. He says that is why he decided to establish the Muslim Community Center six years ago.

The center, a social services agency, is in North Richland Hills

and serves clients on Saturdays. It is open to anyone but is especially a place where Muslims can seek counseling, medical assistance, and other services with fewer cultural and language barriers.

Included is free medical help for those without insurance. In addition, women can seek help with incidents of domestic violence, which is a problem in the Islamic community despite the teachings against it, Dr. Ahmed said.

He said he wanted his center to fill a void, the same way that similar centers in other religious communities have done. He cites members of the Jewish faith who have established Jewish community centers as an example.

Dr. Ahmed's center started out in his home as a part-time effort while he was still working as a psychiatrist in Fort Worth.

At first, it was a hotline for medical, legal, and job referrals and a domestic abuse help line. Soon, seminars on parent and child issues were added. He supported his project with personal funds, donations, and volunteer assistance from other Muslims.

In 1998, the Somali Outreach Community Center in Euless provided Dr. Ahmed space to run a free medical clinic on Saturdays; the clinic was staffed by Muslim volunteers. With the help of his team of advisers, he was able

to buy a building in North Richland Hills to expand the community center and its services.

Dr. Ahmed said most of the clients who visit the center come for help with health and family issues.

But lately, many have come to discuss their concerns about being harassed because of their Islamic faith.

"They fear that their neighbors are going to make insulting remarks or that they won't be treated good in grocery stores," he said. "One worried whether he would be hired if he applied for a job."

Inspiration from U.S.

Dr. Ahmed said he often draws on the inspiration he received from civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. to help his clients cope.

"He taught me that even though you are discriminated against, you still must go on," he said.

He acknowledges to his clients that prejudice does exist, but he tries to keep them optimistic.

"I have to reassure them that it is only a temporary thing," he said. "But my concern is I don't know how long this thing is going to continue."

This story also appears in the Arlington Morning News and the Northeast Tarrant Morning News.