

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

MONDAY, JULY 23, 2001

CUSTOM AID

Center's leader works to provide basic needs for area Muslims

By **PATRICK MCGEE**
Star-Telegram Staff Writer

Like many area Muslims, Basheer Ahmed is frustrated by negative stereotypes about Islam and wants to focus on Muslims' contributions to society. But the crux of this soft-spoken psychiatrist's leadership style is to help Muslims deal with the problems everyone faces.

"I don't think Muslims have any unique problems; our problems are the same," Ahmed said. "The only thing is that we don't recognize that we do have problems."

Ahmed, an Arlington resident with a psychiatric practice in Fort Worth, was one of the main organizers of a conference on Islam's contributions to civilization, a scholarly gathering conducted in June aimed at portraying Muslims as productive members of society.

Ahmed shares his Muslim brethren's view that Islam deserves more respect and better media coverage, but most of his community work focuses on his people's basic needs.

Ahmed said Muslims suffer from personal and social woes that afflict every group, such as alcoholism, domestic violence and unemployment.

"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. Things such as separation of the sexes and time for prayer make services more accessible to Muslims, he said.

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.

"I felt, they are the same religion and we were not doing enough," Ahmed said.

Now based in Richland Hills, the community center is headed by Ahmed, who is constantly networking and organizing to keep the nonprofit group expanding.

When Amer Shakil moved to the Metroplex three years ago and wanted to do community service work, people told him he needed to meet Ahmed.

Shakil caught up with the tireless organizer at a meeting and was soon put to work as a volunteer family physician at the community center.

"He has a lot of motivation to help the community and actually help everybody," Shakil said of Ahmed. "I think it's in his genes. He just wants to provide some kind of service to the community."

In addition to running the clinic, Ahmed is planning a health fair for Sept. 29 and organized a conference on domestic violence in the Muslim community in February.

"He's a very busy man," said Siraj Husain, who runs the community center's Saturday health clinic. "He's very good at organizing."

Ahmed handled much of the conferences' logistics, from promoting the events to hosting the speakers for dinner in his south Arlington home.



Star-Telegram archives/C. SOMODEVILLA

Basheer Ahmed, chairman of the Muslim Community Center for Human Services in Richland Hills, says he and others formed the center to provide help to area Muslims in a culturally sensitive setting.

But the bulk of Ahmed's community work lies with Muslims' personal and social problems. He checks the community center's help line answering machine himself and returns any messages that call for a psychiatrist's help.

Recently, he counseled an immigrant mother worried that her daughter had eschewed her cultural heritage by dating instead of acquiescing to an arranged marriage.

Ahmed is the father of two grown, Americanized children and is in an arranged marriage himself, so he said feels he has qualifications to give the kind of culturally appropriate help he espouses.

Born in India, Ahmed grew up in Pakistan and earned his degrees from universities in both countries.

While doing his postgraduate work in a Scotland hospital in the 1960s, Ahmed's mother found him a wife.

"She said, 'We think this is suitable girl for you. She's also an M.D., and comes from a good family,'" Ahmed said.

He saw Shakila Khan once in a hospital and decided to take his mother's advice. They married in 1967.

"You have to trust your parents and luck," Ahmed said. "Parents try to match us as best we can, and most of the marriages work all right."

Patrick McGee, (817) 548-5476
pmcgee@star-telegram.com