



Love Thy Neighbor
Tolerance and ignorance
side by side in Eugene.
BY *Kaukab Jhumra Smith*

While most Muslims feel very comfortable in Eugene, a smattering of incidents shows that a headscarf, a turban, or just brown skin can antagonize Eugene's small intolerant minority. Sometimes such harassment unwittingly targets people who aren't Muslim at all.

Last spring, someone from a nearby car hurled a golf ball at "Sarah," a Muslim who covers her head, and her kids outside the YMCA. The ball missed and hit a tree instead. She filed a police report in case anything more serious came up later.

"While I'm not surprised it happened, I have nothing

but good things to say about Eugene," says Sarah, who now thinks twice about waiting by the road or after dark for a bus.

A second incident occurred at the campus eatery where Sarah works as cashier. A group of young men scrawled "Free Islamic Militants" on a suggestion card while laughing in her direction. "It didn't hurt me physically, but after reading it I felt so tired," Sarah says. "(I feel) I'm drowning, I'm trying to fight it but it's too much. It's just ignorant people."

Maryam Rankin argues her own headscarf attracts curiosity, not malice. Born in Eugene, she converted to Islam 17 years ago. "You know, you have to think about this just like this - if you went down the street in a costume of some sort, people would look at you," says Rankin. "It doesn't have to be a negative look at all." However, Rankin says after 9/11 she has stopped covering her head when she travels, concerned about heightened security measures at airports.

Rankin emphasizes she finds Eugene safe, although general awareness about Islam is not high. "Eugene is a little village compared to the world, so a lot of people haven't been to places where they can see Muslims," she says.

Hamida Bruton, originally from Malaysia, thinks the self-consciousness immigrants sometimes feel may be self-inflicted. "Maybe it's human; you feel you are so different, you feel that people are looking at you differently," she says, explaining that with time she has stopped feeling conspicuous in Eugene. But she admits that if she covered her head, that could change.

Both Rankin and Sarah say they are careful to be open and friendly toward others when they wear their scarves. "I try to keep that posture very present when I'm covered and in a public place, because if we ever needed at any time in history to make our religion accepted, it's now," says Rankin.

Most Muslims who spoke to EW mentioned a personal need to counter negative public perceptions and lack of awareness about Islam. Most also said they felt very comfortable in Eugene, and attributed the thin but persistent streak of harassment incidents to ignorance and misdirected anger.

One aggravated case began soon after 9/11, when Joseph Mungra, of Indian origin and not Muslim, received threatening phone calls at home. Then, his Dunkin' Donuts franchise on West 11th and Garfield became a repeated target: Store windows were broken almost monthly, says Mungra, and store equipment stolen.

Mungra believes the attacks occurred because his customers included worshippers from the nearby As-Siddiq Islamic Center. "You don't question anything, like what religion you are," he says about his customers. "They're part of your family, as a business owner or as a human." After the vandalism began, regular customers from the mosque stopped frequenting his store out of fear for him and themselves, says Mungra. He decided to close his store after the Iraq war brought more trouble. "I think Eugene has good people but it's very hard for a businessperson to run a business here," he says.

Other non-Muslims have also felt a 9/11 backlash in Eugene. Several incidents of harassment have been recorded against Sikhs in the Eugene-Springfield area. Originating in India, Sikhism encourages its practitioners to leave their hair uncut. To outsiders used to images of Osama bin Laden, a Sikh turban and long beard show up as red flags - such as when a carload of young men on West 11th a few weeks ago shouted at Sat Nam Khulsa, a Sikh convert of German descent, to go back to Iraq.

The Sikh community has rallied and developed close ties with other community groups, says Sat Ganesha Khalsa of the Eugene Sikh Gurdwara. Since 9/11, Sat Ganesha says, he answers questions about his religion in more detail, explaining that Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism are three distinct faiths. Sikhs will not isolate themselves but will use this time to educate others, he says.

Farid Hassan and Tammam Adi, both Muslims who faced threats immediately after 9/11, wholeheartedly support that message. Hassan, owner of Ali Baba Café, and Adi, director of the Islamic Cultural Center, stress the value of meeting ignorance with education.

Hassan once phoned an intimidating caller at his restaurant right back, using caller ID. "What do you have against me?" Hassan asked him, emphasizing they were both Americans who "should be helping each other instead of jumping at each other's throat." At the end of their conversation, the man apologized, Hassan says.

Adi, who sees such calls not as threats but as expressions of anger, reached a similar accord with one of his callers. Put into a police mediation program with the Adis, the caller was instructed to participate in educational events about Islam, Adi says. After one such event, the two shook hands. Adi praises Eugene authorities, who have "reached out tremendously" to the Muslim community after 9/11.

People behind such harassment, sums up Sat Nam, are "feeling a lot of hate and they're projecting it on someone else."

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