PEACE: 'Only optimistic people can envision peace'

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In the days that followed, Muslims packed what they could carry on their backs and heads and made their way to a camp just outside of town to wait for their escorts to the train station. Pritam and an older brother followed some of their elders into the newly-vacated areas.

"We found that people had left in the middle of meals. There was still bread being cooked on the stove or hot food on plates," he said.

When a police and military escort arrived to usher the Muslim refugees, he and his brother trailed other people from the village who decided to shadow the Muslim group.

Not too far from Rupar, Pritam said, the police and military escort completely abandoned their Muslim charges. At that point, Muslim women and children were abducted by Hindus and Sikhs, men were picked off from the group and killed.

At a fork in the road, and with fears rising, the Muslims separated into two groups, one of them taking a paved road, the other heading off onto another path that led to a muddy field.

A large contingent of Hindus and Sikhs managed to surround the Muslim group in the field and things took a grisly turn.

"All the Muslims started back away and it became one big pile of people in the middle," Pritam said. "They were pulled off one at a time and killed."

Pritam and his brother were less than 10 yards away as the massacre unfolded.

It is unknown how many were killed that day, or as part of the partitioning of India and Pakistan, but estimates range from a few hundred thousand to two million. More than 10 million people were displaced.

Pritam went on to earn a doctorate in neuropsychology and eventually moved to the Pacific Northwest and opened his own practice. But, in December 1992, the past came rushing up to meet him when he heard news of a 450-year-old mosque in India being destroyed after a political rally turned violent. Subsequent rioting claimed the lives of about 2,000 Hindus and Muslims.

The following year, Pritam and other colleagues from around the world banded together to form the Association for Communal Harmony in Asia (ACHA).

For his work with ACHA, and his individual commitments to seeking peace, Pritam, now 81, was honored twice last month: first, with a Pioneer Award from the local chapter of the NAACP, and then with a Peace Lecture Award by the Salem Peace Lecture Committee.

KEIZERTIMES/Eric A. Howald

Dr. Pritam Rohila with his wife, Kundan, at their home in Keizer. The couple has made several peace and goodwill trips to India and Pakistan in pursuit of cultural harmony.

One of Pritam's primary roles after ACHA was formed was maintaining a newsletter with peace news from Asian countries. But, in 2004, he and his wife, Kundan, took on a more active role. They went on thier first peace and goodwill mission to Pakistan and India with a group of ACHA colleagues. They went again in 2008 on their own and traveled the Khyber Pass between Pakistan and Afghanistan.

"It was by the seat of our pants. We knew that we wanted to promote peace and that was the basic idea," Pritam said. "But we realized that working with officials, or even peace groups, we were not getting too far. We would gather together, eat a meal or drink tea and give speeches, and then we would disappear."

In 2011 and 2013, the couple returned to the area again, but this time with a new plan. Pritam had heard about a couple offering peace camps for youth in areas where Jewish and Arab populations were struggling to coexist. He and Kundan set out to try it in their homeland.

They offered several camps over the course of the two trips focusing on young adults ages 18 to 30. They spent time in non-religious meditation, pursuing personal peace, and then worked through ways their students might extend that feeling to members of their family and neighbors.

"I believe that the things we learn don't disappear, we encounter something that allows us to make sense of them later. The ideas stay there and they do influence our conduct later if not immediately," Pritam said. "You can change for the better on a smaller scale and change mentally and emotionally in your other interactions."

Kundan said it is a misconception to think that people in the Middle East pursue conflict out of sport or spite.

"It's not that people don't like to have peace in their world, but they are so involved in their lives, they can't figure out how to make peace," she said. "In Pakistan and India, they are fighting just for their day-to-day survival."

> "It's not that people don't like to have peace in their world, but they are so involved in their lives ..."
>
> — Kundan Rohila

The experiences led Pritam to his own definition of peace as "a dynamic and multidimensional way of relating within (personal peace) and between individuals (interpersonal peace), groups, nations (international peace) and with the environment (universal peace). It has to be characterized by compassion, empathy, respect for the rights of others, tolerance, justice and it has to lead to a benefit for all involved."

Attaining each rung of that peace ladder might seem overwhelming, but both Pritam and Kundan emanate their own peaceful auras even though they both travel different paths to the same destination.

Pritam said it starts with optimism.

"Only optimistic people can envision peace. If you are a pessimist, you're not going to have any way to do that," he said.

He also exercises frequently on a treadmill, or simply by making laps around the house.

Kundan relies heavily on prayer and mantras, some passed down through her family, and others picked up along her journey.

Neither adheres to the rituals of an organized religion, but Hinduism played a large role in Pritam's beliefs and Kundan's Jainist foundations are still relatively intact.

"The foundation you grew up with, the environment you grew up in, stays in your mind all your life. The seeds are there. I pray for everyone to have peace and to be satisfied with what they have," she said.

Asked whether he had any advice for those looking to pursue peace during a turbulent time in time in the United States, Pritam doesn't ponder an answer for long.

"After a storm and the limbs of the trees break or there is some flooding, the water recedes and there is new growth. I think the basic idea in Buddhism is that change is the order of nature, like seasons, and trying to make things last is a foolish thing to do," he said. "I don't think we have to pull our teeth to make things happen. There are natural opportunities and agents for healing. A crisis, even a volcano erupting, gives birth to new creative processes. It may not be the same, but something will be there."

holiday bazaars

• Get in the holiday spirit on Nov. 11 and 12 with the Assistance League of Salem-Keizer's Annual Holiday Open House

The Historic Daue House Gift Shop at 1095 Saginaw Street S in Salem will have hundreds of gift choices including themed decorated trees, fresh-baked specialty pastry items and much more. Encore Furniture Store, 1198 Commercial Street S., will feature light refreshments, a giving tree and selected book sales. Shopping hours will be 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.

• McNary High School will host its annual holiday bazaar Saturday, Nov. 12. Hours are 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Proceeds benefit Celtic clubs and activities.

Member spotlight
CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates

Shaney Starr

CASA (noun) – A common person with an uncommon commitment; a powerful voice in a child's life; a volunteer citizen working to make sure children live in safe and permanent homes.

Through volunteers, CASA of Marion County, Inc. advocates for abused and neglected children who have been removed from their homes, are in the custody of state foster care and need safe and permanent homes. Court Appointed Special Advocate (CASA) volunteers are a caring and consistent adult presence for abused and neglected children. For many abused and neglected children facing multiple challenges, a CASA volunteer may be the one constant adult presence in their lives. Advocates stay with each case until it is closed and the child is placed in a safe, permanent home. We don't say it lightly, we say it with pride, when we announce CASA as a Keizer Chamber member.

Shaney Starr, Executive Director with CASA is a step-mom of three and resides in Keizer. Mrs. Starr has a passion to serve the foster children of Marion County and give a voice to each child. She states, "Every child deserves an opportunity to thrive, and advocates for these children have a chance to be that constant in their lives."

Are you interested in making a difference? Mrs. Starr states volunteers take a 30-hour training program, then are sworn in by a judge as an advocate for a child. With an average 18-month commitment, CASA advocates could make a long-term difference in a child's life. Marion County has over 500 children in foster care. There are currently only advocates for a third of the children in foster care in this county. CASA needs people like you.

For more information, please contact Shaney Starr.

CASA
Shaney Starr, MS
Executive Director
503-967-6420
www.casamarionor.org

CASA Court Appointed Special Advocates FOR CHILDREN MARION COUNTY

Now taking applications for float entries for the 2016 Keizer Holiday Lights Parade, Saturday, Dec. 10
Email info@keizerchamber.com for a form.
Sponsored by Bonaventure Senior Living

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