

WORRIES RETURN

Muslims still dealing with harassment as anniversary nears

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MORGANTOWN — Eight days ago, a drunken football fan spied Sohail Chaudhry outside Mountaineer Field. Chaudhry was quietly doing his job, delivering the West Virginia University student newspaper.

The drunken man must have noticed Chaudhry's dark skin, his black hair, his beard. He decided that Chaudhry needed a 9/11 reminder.

“He kept saying, ‘We haven't forgotten that day,’” said Chaudhry, an engineering student from Pakistan. “‘You'd better watch out for your life in this town.’ He just kept repeating that.”

Meanwhile, Wafi Albalawa was looking for a house to rent. He's almost finished with his Ph.D. in computer science, but his Morgantown apartment is just getting too cramped for him, his wife and their four small children.

He found the perfect house. He gave the landlord all the usual information: employer, income, references.

Then he mentioned that he is originally from Saudi Arabia, and that the Saudi government is sponsoring his education.

“Then,” Albalawa said, “they say they are no longer interested to rent the house to me.”

West Virginia has escaped the brutal hate crimes against people who resemble Arabs, hate crimes that tripled in the months after Sept. 11: Two Dallas-area convenience store clerks, one Pakistani and one U.S. citizen from India, gunned down by a white supremacist. A Sikh Indian shot dead at a gas station in Mesa, Ariz. And on and on.

West Virginians have dealt with some discrimination: A Princeton mosque vandalized. Muslim women harassed on the street.

But, as Chaudhry said, “Sept. 11 is coming close. ...

“The Muslims in town are worried again.”

Worry seems to depend on level of foreign-ness

Ask a Muslim, “Are you worried about this Sept. 11?” Some will automatically assume you mean, “Are you worried about your safety?”

Others will automatically assume, “Are you worried the terrorists will attack again?”

It all seems to depend on the person's level of foreign-ness. People who spent most of their life in Arab or South Asian countries display a musical voice, a fluid walk, and sometimes a style of dress that sets them apart from white Americans. Many of them have suffered discrimination during the past year.

Those who were born here, or who immigrated as young children, still have the dark complexion and hair. However, others often don't realize they're Muslim.

Mohamed Sabbagh lives in an apartment over the Morgantown mosque. He has pale skin, as Syrians often do.

“I came [to America] when I was, like, 2-and-a-half,” Sabbagh said. When you ask him where he’s from, he says, “Weston.” Nobody has bothered him as a result of Sept. 11.

Same with Hamza Shah, who was born and raised in Princeton. His family is originally from Pakistan. He is clean-shaven, wears American clothes and speaks with a West Virginia accent.

“People with scarves, stuff like that were more likely to be targeted,” he said.

People like the Albalawa family. Wafi has a full beard, and his wife wears a scarf and veil when she leaves the house.

“We hear some bad words,” he said. “Public places — the mall — you might hear someone shout, that’s all. When I go to the Kroger, I hear people.

“Last week, I hear some students calling me: ‘Hey, bin Laden.’ But I don’t care, as long as they don’t physically attack me.”

Right after Sept. 11, Chaudhry said, some young Syrian women were walking on Morgantown’s High Street. Some white men surrounded them and started pulling their veils off.

“They said, ‘Take off this hijab, because you have guns underneath,’” he said. Some other American men stopped them.

It’s one thing some Americans have in common with the terrorists, Chaudhry said: They are so full of hatred, they lash out at innocent people.

“When you are in a situation where you can do nothing, where you’re facing tanks and you have stones in your hand,” he said. “At that point, you stop using your brain.

“Just like the American public did.”

A true Muslim would never end his own life

Chaudhry speaks calmly, reasonably, with a gentle smile. People must understand, he says, that the terrorists could not have truly been followers of Islam.

“They were enemies of Islam,” he said. “Although those enemies might be Muslims themselves.”

For one thing, a true Muslim would never end his own life. “Suicide is ‘haram’ — not acceptable — in Islam,” Chaudhry said.

Also, Muslims are never supposed to kill innocent people in war. “And all of the people who died in the World Trade Center were innocent,” Chaudhry said.

Muslims are not allowed to kill women, no matter what. They’re not allowed to attack old people or children. They’re not allowed to damage buildings in war.

“If these were Muslims, then why were they reportedly in a nightclub drinking the night before [Sept. 11]? In Islam, you cannot drink,” he said. “So I don’t believe they were Muslims.”

Finally, Chaudhry said, look at the outcome of the terrorist attacks: America destroyed the Taliban regime, which was supported by Muslim extremists. America is considering invading Iraq, a Muslim country. Muslims in America have suffered from hate crimes, and their mosques defaced.

“Why would any Muslim try to do this to Islam?” Chaudhry said.

Many Muslims worldwide are ignorant about many things, he said, including their own religion. Pakistan’s literacy rate is only 9 percent, he said.

“They have been brought up in war. No education. They are living in shelters, these ghettos. I expect this from them.”

Chaudhry said the terrorist attacks could have completely discredited Islam, the fastest-growing religion in America.

But they didn’t.

“Due to the grace of God, the reverse has happened,” he said.

“More people are trying to understand Islam.”

The call to prayer is answered

Just before 5 p.m., Ahmed El-Sherbeeny removed his shoes and entered a plain, white-painted wooden building, tucked away behind the McDonald’s on University Avenue.

He walked through a carpeted room to a bathing nook, removed the white knit kufi from his head, and patiently explained the ablutions he must perform before praying.

“Hands, gargle, nose, face, arms — right and left — head, ears and two feet,” he said.

Then he returned to the carpeted room and turned on a microphone. He faced east and began to sing the prayer call. Speakers piped the high, chanting song into the open air.

Men began to file in: Sabbagh from upstairs, and Shah, who kicked off their shoes, dropped their backpacks and padded quietly to the front of the room, bowing before settling into quiet contemplation.

A small boy entered with a tall man. They stood side by side, the boy copying the man’s movements — bending, kneeling, bowing.

The tall man leads the prayer. A young man in hospital scrubs is the last to file in, making 10 who pray along with the leader.

When the simple, silent ceremony is finished, the boy skips across the soft carpet and out the door.

Within a year, Morgantown will have a new mosque to replace the little white building, Albalawa said.

“It will look like a mosque from outside, with the minaret,” a tower from which the muezzin calls people to prayer.

“We plan to have an open house soon, for Muslim and non-Muslim to get to know each other.”

Morgantown, like other cities in West Virginia, is developing a sizable Muslim community. Albalawa can count Muslims from Asia, Europe, South Africa, North America, Malaysia and Indonesia.

“A big percentage of these people are professionals,” he said. “Doctors, a lot of post-doc faculty at WVU.”

Late this summer, the State Department started conducting background checks on all foreign male students between the ages of 16 and 45.

“In fact,” said Peter Li, WVU’s dean of international students, “some of our students are still stuck overseas.” By the end of the second week of classes, eight students will still be waiting on their security clearance. They had already missed so many classes, they probably won’t be able to study in the United States this semester.

Surprisingly, Li said, Sept. 11 and its aftermath haven’t cut down the number of international students at WVU.

“Unofficially, we are getting 160 more international students as opposed to the same time last year,” he said. Students from the Middle East and Pakistan make up about 10 percent of the 1,350 international students.

Albalawa said some of his friends from Saudi Arabia abandoned their plans to pursue a Ph.D. in the United States after Sept. 11.

“In fact, if I listen to my mom, brother and sisters, I would not come to this country,” he said. He recently went back to Saudi Arabia for a visit, and his family urged him to stay home.

He definitely would have, if he wasn’t so close to finishing his degree.

“I try to convince them it’s getting better,” he said. “But I believe I am taking some risk being in this country now.”

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