

Today I Met a Man Who Wears a Turban



At Left: *Rusty Kennedy of OC Human Relations, (third from right) facilitating a Listening Session.*

Below Center: *Dr. Arinder Singh Chada and Jasjit Singh Ahuja, M.D. welcome OC Human Relations to the Sikh Guadwara, (worship service).*

Below: *Gurpreet Singh Ahuja, M.D. Boardmember and Eli Reyna of OC Human Relations prepare for a Listening Session.*

Photos by OC Human Relations Commission.

*by Rusty Kennedy, Executive Director
OC Human Relations Commission*

Everyday of his 40 years in Fullerton he has faced the judging eyes of people who could not see beyond his turban and beard. And what they saw in the turban was all too often, terrorist. Even in retirement when he went to offer his services to the US Census, he felt he was not called back because of his turban.

Why does he wear it? Does he support Osama Bin Laden? Is he a terrorist? Why is he in America? Why doesn't he go back to his own country?

His son told me that he worries that many of his friends who wear the turban or Patka (scarf covered top knot of the younger kids) internalize the bigotry that comes their way from an early age. He wonders aloud whether there are things that can be done to help them to understand why they are targeted so unfairly, by people who do not know them.

I learned that the turban was the mark that identified a man who would help anyone in need, at any time. Defend them, feed them, care for them, do anything for them, it is the obligation of he who dons the turban.



OC Human Relations Commission Sikh Listening Session

Today I Met a Man Who Wore a Turban, *continued*

Fierce warriors on the side of the USA in WWI and WWII, who came home to a country that systematically denied them jobs because of the turban, who cast a suspicious eye on them because they looked different, who lashed out at them when 9/11 sent the country into panic mode. The first murder of an innocent American after 9/11 was a man who wore the turban.

Today I met a man who offered his service to me, as did dozens of his friends, wanting to help teach what his turban means, or help protect other people who face injustice.

As we settled into the Sikh Temple of neighboring Buena Park the faithful were just ending their worship service, and we were invited to join them in the "Langar" a meal that is shared with anyone who comes. I mean to all comers at every Sikh center, every Sunday, everywhere in the world, as part of a commitment to serve the needy. A wonderful meal prepared and served by volunteers. We sat on rugs on the floor, because when the Sikh religion was started, one of the fundamental tenets was that all people were equal, no one was above another, and to show this everyone sat on the floor at the same level and ate the same food. And this in India which was primarily Hindu and deeply committed to a Caste system that the Sikhs felt was unfair.

After we ate together, we gathered in a classroom and sat on the floor or in chairs, and I asked the question, what is life like for you today, 10 years after 9/11 when so many Sikhs were attacked and even killed by angry, scared Americans striking out at the stereotype of terrorist implanted in their minds?

A businessman shares that his company is chosen for first time contracts only after all alternatives have been tried.

A teacher tells of having students call her terrorist, and administration dismissing it as "just kids".

An elementary school student faced bullies who call him names, humiliated him and beat him because he looks so different with his Patka.

A university student who is ridiculed by a Physics professor for not cutting his hair, or shaving.

A parent whose son is the only one in his group passed over for part-time employment in college.

A medical doctor who faces suspicious looks and silence when he passes through the hospital where he works.

An engineer who sees his colleagues smiling and jubilant at the death of Osama bin Laden, quickly mute their celebration when he enters the room. I suggest that, in that situation why not tell them that you are Sikh, not even Muslim, and he suggests he doesn't feel right saying he is not Muslim, because he knows that a person's faith doesn't have anything to do with whether you are a patriot or terrorist.

In the Listening Sessions of the OC Human Relations Commission, the Sikhs share that few people here know anything about them. Even in their innocence the children ask; Are you a genie? So little understanding of this religion and its generous traditions born of the Punjab region of India.

The fifth largest religion in the world, behind: Christian, Muslim, Hindu, and Buddhist, is Sikh.

Today I met a man thought to be a terrorist because he wore a turban and I now know him as a patriot, neighbor and helper.