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Voorhees mosque seen as a national model

By Edward Colimore

Inquirer Staff Writer

Emotions were running high at the zoning board meetings in Voorhees. One resident after another stood up to denounce a mosque proposal. Some were stirred by anonymous fliers warning of "extremists" with possible "connections to terrorists."

But the soft-spoken Zia Rahman patiently answered their concerns more than six years ago and reached out like a diplomat to other faiths.

The successful effort by mosque trustee Rahman and fellow area Muslims against stiff opposition has become a national model, even as controversy rages over a proposed Islamic center near the 9/11 attack site in New York City.

A one-hour film, *Talking Through Walls*, depicting Rahman's struggle and support from other faiths, has been shown on public television stations and at public events from Philadelphia to Alaska over the last year.

It was presented last month at Park51, site of the planned Muslim cultural center and mosque in Manhattan, and is being shown on New Jersey Network through Monday, as well as at a Nov. 7 public event in Medford.

"We tell people to look at what happened" in Voorhees, said Zahida Rahman, widow of Zia, who died last year at 64 of a brain tumor. "There was so much opposition, but look what came out of it.

"We are together, brothers and sisters in this community," she said.

The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), a national Muslim civil-liberties and advocacy organization based in Washington, praised the Voorhees effort and has encouraged others to reach out to communities as Zia Rahman did, speaking at churches and synagogues.

Rahman's work of building bridges led to an unusual cooperation agreement between the Catholic Diocese of Camden and the Muslim American Community Association, which operates the mosque.

The positive outcome stands in contrast to a Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life survey in August showing that the American public's "favorable view" of Islam dropped from 41 percent five years ago to 30 percent today.

The survey of more than 1,000 adults also found 51 percent agreeing more with those who object to building an Islamic center and mosque near the former World Trade Center site. Thirty-four percent believed the project should go forward.

This month, CAIR announced an Islamophobia department to organize conferences, seminars, cultural exchanges, and other activities intended to encourage dialogue and education.

"It used to be 10 years ago that saying that Islam is evil and has to be deported, you were considered on the fringes of society, but hate rhetoric is moving to the mainstream," said Ibrahim Hooper, a CAIR spokesman. "Now you see it on cable and radio talk shows and letters to the editor. You see very little pushback."

Cases of Quran-burnings and confrontations on streets also have ticked up over the last year. This month, four teenagers in Staten Island, N.Y., were charged with a hate crime in the assault and harassment of a classmate for his Islamic faith.

Anti-Muslim feelings have gradually increased since 9/11, said Khalid Blankinship, professor of religion and an expert on Islam at Temple University.

"As far as Voorhees goes, it illustrates that the place where Muslims are well integrated doesn't develop that kind of animosity," he said. "People make an exception for Muslims they know outside the stereotyping that goes on."

"We all look for peace," said Blankinship, a Muslim who has presented Islam to other faith communities, including Christians and Jews. "One-on-one is what works."

That was Zia Rahman's philosophy. He patiently worked to convince residents, often one at a time, that a mosque where a ramshackle building stood would improve the community.

Changing minds wasn't easy. Rahman and congregation members persevered through long, sometimes emotional, zoning board hearings, traffic studies, and site-plan questioning.

One of the few voices speaking out early in favor of the mosque belonged to Voorhees resident Lori Volpe, a Buddhist.

"The fliers drove me to go to the hearing," said Volpe, one of several residents to form the Coalition for Multi-Faith Democracy in support of Rahman's efforts. "We realized we had to counteract the opposition and draw in other faiths."

Rahman, a native of Pakistan and retired director of corporate information technology at Rohm & Haas Co., held meetings at his Voorhees home with supporters, including Volpe's coalition.

Other groups added their support, including the Anti-Defamation League and the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Southern Jersey, a nonprofit public-policy group.

"We never felt like giving up," Zia Rahman, managing director and trustee of the Muslim American Community Association, said when the mosque opened at Haddonfield-Berlin Road and Lafayette Avenue.

The project was approved in 2003; ground was broken in 2004, and construction continued through 2005 and 2006.

"We made a commitment to ourselves," Rahman said. "No matter what goes on, our endeavor would never stop. We continued to strive and ask for God's help."

Rahman "started a whole movement toward interfaith cooperation, dialogue, and learning," said the Rev. Joseph Wallace, who was the Camden Diocese's director of ecumenical and interreligious affairs in 2008 when the cooperation agreement was reached between the diocese and the Muslim association.

"He sparked a lot of activity between Muslims and Roman Catholics, reaching out together in charitable endeavors to help the poor and disadvantaged in the community," Wallace said. "He will always be remembered as a towering figure in interfaith rapprochement in South Jersey."

Many regions are seeing "cultural and spiritual realities adjusting," said the Rev. Manish Mishra, pastor of the Unitarian Universalist Church in Cherry Hill. "Suburban communities which had no experience except with Judaism and Christianity are learning that there are people drawn to Islam and Hinduism."

The issue "can be wrestled with well or poorly," Mishra said, adding that in Voorhees, "there's been a huge difference in the last six years."

Talking Through Walls tells a story of how building a mosque helped unite a community.

"It was the model," said Alex Kronemer, executive producer of United Productions, which produced the film. "We saw what happened as the story of America at its greatest. By itself, [the project] would have died without the spirit of America coming forth and people saying it should be allowed."

At the mosque's first open house for friends and community residents in 2006, Zia Rahman

seemed to understand the impact of the project, three years before his death and the film's release.

In the prayer hall, he told supporters of various faiths that "you are being mentioned all across the United States. You have set a precedent."

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