

Interviews with Sikh Americans

Page 1 of 4

From "Justice for All: The Aftermath of September 11th" report

All excerpts in this handout were presented to a public audience in an event called "Justice for All: The Aftermath of September 11th." This public hearing was held on September 21, 2002 at Town Hall in Seattle, Washington. Federal and local public officials as well as representatives from the FBI and the INS were invited and attended. The public hearing was organized by the Hate Free Zone Campaign of Washington (now called OneAmerica) along with more than 80 community organizations including the Wing Luke Asian Museum so community members of all ages could speak out about the discrimination and bullying they have experienced.

Jasbir

I am a scientist by profession and have been teaching at Renton Gurudwara Sunday school since September of 1995. I have around seventy students in our school. Many of the children have come to me since September 11th talking about what they are facing at school.

Bullying happens everywhere; we all know that. But, ironically, it happens more at educational institutions. Bullying can leave permanent scars on everyone, especially children. It can cripple children's confidence. They feel neglected and left out. Somehow after September 11th, the bullying incidents have increased against minorities, and especially Sikhs. Simply because we wear turbans.

Sikhism is a separate religion from Hinduism and Islam. Hair is a very important part of our religion. Around two centuries back, Sikhs were tortured, killed, put alive in fire, placed in front of moving trains, yet they declined to remove or cut their hair. But bullying incidents with young Sikh students in schools and around have led to circumstances where many Sikh students feel insecure and they have removed their hair, just to be a part of the mainstream and not being able to bear the peer pressure. This is very upsetting for our community.

Bullying is a very sensitive issue for young students. Many times, children don't even want to discuss or talk such issues with their parents; maybe they are scared, humiliated, ashamed, or feel inferior. They feel that they are treated as second grade students. Generally, students become introverted and avoid their peers who trouble them, and they get bullied even more. If they resist or stand up, then they are to be blamed. They start reacting by ignoring such incidents, or by suffering in silence.

We had a meeting in our gurudwara to generally discuss the issue of bullying, then also, students were self conscious and hesitant to participate. After a lot of coaxing, we received the first answer, then a few more, and then finally, it turned into a casual discussion forum. There were 60 children there, and many of them had stories to tell.

Teachers should look around and observe in their classes for the signs of rejection/solace. Teachers, school administrators, students, and parents should be educated about different minority cultures. For this purpose, organizations like Hate Free Zone can play a catalyst role.

Lesson 7: Japanese Americans Look Back and Post 9-11 Issues

Interview Data Handout – Page 2 of 4

Jasbir (continued from page 1)

I would like to end with a statement commonly used by my daughter: “Sticks and stones can break your bones, but words can cut to the core.” We need to repair the cut core instead of leaving it injured.

These children, who are Sikh and Muslim, were asked the question, “What has happened to you since 9/11?”

Responses from Sikh American students

Jobanpreet, Age 9

My name is Jobanpreet, my age is 10 years old, excuse me, um, 9 and this person called me a hamburger head and then I felt so mad and then I took three breaths and then I got calm. I didn’t like it. I cried and I cried, but I was still brave.

What does your hair mean for you?

It is our religion and because our Babaji, Guru Gobind Singhji told us not to cut your hair. Never cut your hair. It is important for us.

How did you feel when he called you a hamburger head?

Not so good, I was really mad.

Did you tell anybody about it?

Yeah, I told the teacher on the playground, but they don’t care. They don’t care about my religion.

What happens when they don’t care, how do you feel?

Not so good. Sad. [Starts to cry] really sad.

What would you like the schools to do to the kids who are bullying other kids?

I would want them to have a rule to tell the principal. To have a rule don’t bully and don’t make fun of religions.

What would you say to other kids who are bullying?

Stop that, please.

SJ, Age 12

My classmate called me Osama bin Laden, and said my father is also Osama bin Laden. I told him to stop calling me names but he didn’t listen. I told my teachers but no action was taken.

Lesson 7: Japanese Americans Look Back and Post 9-11 Issues

Interview Data Handout – Page 3 of 4

Parteek, age 14

I wanted to tell you that I have taken a lot of abuse in my life in America. Ever since I have come to America, I haven't fought back anybody. Sometimes even though I was one of the best basketball players in the school, I have been picked last and I haven't been able to play because like kids wouldn't let me play. In my one year at ***** elementary, I had been punched, called names, and beaten a lot. It got so bad that my Dad went in and reported. Still, I was called names and hit. Then my Dad took his friend with him, but nothing changed. Once, I stayed after school to play basketball, two boys came up and one boy had boxing gloves on. One boy took my basketball, and he started punching me until the teacher came and gave me my basketball back and I was on the ground crying. I have been hit so many times. I don't even know why the point I came to America for.

Finally, someone told my Dad to move to Redmond, because it was a better neighborhood. In Redmond I was still called names and made fun of for my hair, but I don't want to cut my hair because I love my hair because it is part of my religion.

So then, my dad bought a house in Auburn and I thought things would get better because ever since I have come to America, I have gone to a different school every school year. So I was tired of moving around and trying to make friends. When I moved to Auburn, I thought it might go away 'cause nobody knew me here, so I thought maybe I could be different. Here in Auburn, I tried to fit in. Then September 11th happened, and people started being mean to me again. Calling me Habib, towel head, pepper head. People called me Osama and Osama's son. And a lot of people did drugs, so I was afraid that if I told anybody, I might even get hurt bad.

It made me feel very bad when they called me diaperhead because I love my hair, it is part of my religion and I never want to cut my hair. I don't know why they just don't like different people.

It hasn't gone away since September 11th, and people still call me those names. I wish kids who bully would just quit. Can't they see that it hurts people? Even if they don't show it? I know teachers know it goes on in school, and they just ignore it. Please don't ignore it.

[Note: This story was presented by videotape to the audience at Town Hall since Parteek could not be at the event. After six years of bullying, he finally lashed out by slapping a student who was throwing pencils at him at school. The student's parents pressed charges against Parteek, and Parteek had to serve time in a juvenile detention center at the time of this event.]

Lesson 7: Japanese Americans Look Back and Post 9-11 Issues

Interview Data Handout – Page 4 of 4

Kulwinder

(translated from Punjabi)

My name is Kulwinder Singh. I moved from Stockton, California to Kent, Washington in 1999. I used to be a truck driver and have been driving a taxi ever since I moved to Washington. I have been blessed with two kids - one boy and one girl.

I want to tell you how the events of September 11, 2001 have changed my life. On September 13th, at about 11:00 PM, I was told by the dispatch staff to pick up two customers from Gregory, a restaurant close to the airport. When I reached the location, there was no one outside -- so I went in asked the bartender for the people waiting for the ride by their name.

The bartender told the guests that their taxi was here. One of the gentlemen came outside along with me and started shouting, "You are a terrorist". I knew he was mistaking me because of my turban and beard and I explained to the gentleman, that I was a Sikh and did not have anything to do with the terrorists. The person was a little drunk, so I ignored him. I thought my job is to just take the people to their destination and not to worry about their comments. The other gentleman stayed inside.

The other person did not show for about 10 minutes. So I requested the gentleman who came along with me that he should please call his friend. I said if you would like me to wait a little longer, I will need to switch the meter on and you can pay for the wait as long as you like. At this, he got very agitated and started shouting again, "You are a terrorist, Osama! You have ruined us and blown up America." I ignored him because he seemed to be drunk. Finally, the other passenger showed up and the first gentleman told the second man, "He is a terrorist. This terrorist cannot wait his taxi for us." I thought that now that they both were here, I should take them to their destination. But instead, the both of them joined together in calling me names and shouting at me. I became very alarmed and was afraid for my safety. So I refused to drive them and requested them to vacate my taxi. I was afraid that rather than taking them in the taxi, where they may try to harm me on the way, it was better for me to drop them here. When they refused to get out of the taxi, I said that I would have to call the police. They told me not to do so and when I tried to reach for my phone, they grabbed my arm. I jumped out of the cab and both of them grabbed me. They tore part of my beard and knocked my turban to the side. This was extremely humiliating for me as a Sikh. I tried to push them to get away and ran inside the restaurant. I asked for help and then decided that no matter what, I will not let these two men get away. I knew they did not have a weapon and so I pursued them on foot and called 911 on my phone.