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Top Stories

Diversity program puts a face on 'The Sikh Next Door'

By: Bill Bittar, Associate Editor 12/30/2005

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Sikhs first migrated to American from their native Punjab, India, in the 1800's, and they played important roles throughout U.S. history. The followers of the fifth-largest religion in the world worked on the early railroads, mills and farms, and are now the largest landowners in California.

But it took a case of mistaken identity in 2001 for this religious group to finally be noticed by their fellow Americans. Sikh men wear turbans, and Osama bin Laden, who led a terrorist attack against the United States on Sept. 11, 2001, was wearing one in the steady diet of TV feeds airing in living rooms around the world. As a result, some U.S. citizens, thirsty for revenge, mistakenly attacked Sikhs.

Since then, efforts have been made to educate the public about their friendly neighbors, and a Sikh family in Fairfield has been active in the cause.

"You don't see Arabs and Muslims here with turbans," said Ravi Dhingra of Fairfield.

"Ninety-five percent of the time, it's Sikhs."

Inni Dhingra, Ravi Dhingra's wife, is working to promote a new teacher's guide entitled, "The Sikh Next Door," an educational program teaching students about the religion in the classroom. The Dhingras' daughter, Tara, a 17-year-old Fairfield Ludlowe High School senior, appears in a documentary that is a key component to the program.

During the Lohgarh Sikh Educational Association summer camp held in Pennsylvania in 2003, participants came up with the idea to develop a curriculum for students in grades 6-12. Tami R. Yeager, who has made documentaries for PBS, agreed to help make the 15-minute Sikh documentary for the teaching package. And the Lohgarh Sikh Educational Foundation headed the project with support from the National Conference for Community and Justice Chevron Texaco September 11th Anti-Bias Fund.

Dhingra hopes public school teachers will use the guide during Diversity Month in May.

"I've gone up to the Board of Education in Hartford and they are very excited about this," she said. "They want me to go to the annual teachers' diversity conference. We're hoping to work with school systems and get it out there."

Who are the Sikhs?

Dhingra said teachers have a variety of exercises they can assign to their students following viewing of the 15-minute documentary "The Sikh Next Door," including having students give an oral presentation or make a world religions table, or having them research a topic such as Punjabi food.

The documentary begins with Tara Dhingra interviewing people in Times Square to find out what they know about Sikhs, who number 500,000 in the U.S. and 22 million worldwide.

"Sikh? What kind of Sikh?" one man answered. "Young lady, I ain't never heard about a Sikh. Never heard about a Sikh in my life."

"We have a long way to go," Inni Dhingra said. "Because it's not communities like Fairfield and Westport we are worried about. We're worried about the streets of New York City."

The Sikh religion started when many Indians opposed their country's caste system, which fostered the belief that the rich and poor were determined at birth. The 10 gurus, or prophets of the Sikh religion, proclaimed that everyone is equal and that there is one god.

Anoop, 14, a Sikh from Richmond, Va., who appeared in the documentary, said Sikhs believe in helping the oppressed.

Sikhs worship in a Gurdwara, which is their church. A Gurdwara is open to people of every religion, and shoes must be taken off to enter.

"Even though men and women sit on their own sides of the Gurdwara, it does not mean they are not equal," said Manpreet, 12, of San Francisco, Calif., who also appeared in the film.

Explaining the turban

"We keep our hair because we consider it a gift from God, so why should we cut that away? Why should we alter it?" Anoop said. "I feel like this is my commitment to my gurus and my religion."

The documentary shows Anoop brushing out his long hair in the morning before taking it up so it will fit neatly inside his turban. He explained that all Sikh men wear turbans, and that it is

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Anoop's friend and neighbor, Naveen, 13, wears a patka to school. A patka is a smaller turban worn by younger Sikhs. "I believe my hair is strength," Naveen said. "It makes me stronger ... unique."

Sikhs are required to keep five artifacts of faith called kakkars. Uncut hair, kesh, is one of them. The others are kara, kanga, kirpan and kachhera.

Kara is a steel bangle, which is a reminder of good deeds. Kanga is a small wooden comb placed in the hair that represents cleanliness and purity. Kirpan is a dull-edged religion sword, which represents a commitment to justice and taking care of the weak. And kachhera is long undershorts, representing modesty.

Ravi Dhingra said he hopes the new teachers guide will prove to be an effective teaching tool for young students.

"Sikhs have been in this country for a long, long time," he said. "They have been around since the early part of the 20th Century. It's no longer about 9/11 or discrimination. It's really about teaching diversity and teaching kids in school about Sikhs, who are a vital part of the U.S. and Canada."

For information, or to order "The Sikh Next Door," visit www.sikhnextdoor.org.

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