

HAJJ

Two Charleston men fulfill dream of pilgrimage to Mecca

Publication: THE CHARLESTON GAZETTE

Published: 05/05/2000

Byline: SUSAN WILLIAMS

When they left Charleston, they might be described as two husbands, fathers and state workers.

When they returned from Mecca, they can easily be described as transformed.

Both completed what members of the Muslim faith call a "Hajj" this year. The Hajj is one of the five pillars or foundations of the Islamic faith.

Mohammed Khan, 40, and Ismail Hassan, 50, both of Charleston, said without a doubt the experience was the most powerful of their lives.

The other four pillars of the religion are faith in God, prayer, concern for the needy and self-purification or fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. Each Muslim who is physically and financially able to go is required to make the pilgrimage at least once in a lifetime.

Muslims must be able to pay their obligations to the poor and still have money enough to make the trip. They cannot go into debt to pay for the Hajj. They must also have enough money to provide for their families while they make the Hajj.

As they gave details of their March trip, Hassan turned to Khan and asked, "Did you cry?"

"You cannot stop your tears," Khan said of the powerful experience.

Born in Bangladesh, Khan was raised in a Muslim family. Born in Charleston, Hassan was raised in an Episcopalian family, but he did not attend church for several years after he became an adult. Many people know Hassan by his non-Muslim name of Rick Doneghy.

"I wanted to start going back to church," Hassan said. About 10 years ago, he went to the mosque in South Charleston because he was close friends with someone who was already a Muslim. "I went to the mosque to ask a few questions," he said. "I felt a great deal of peace, and I wanted to be a part of that peace. So I embraced Islam," Hassan said.

Hassan said, "I said I wanted to make Hajj before I was 50. As soon as I decided I was going, everything fell into place. It was as though I was being sent there."

Khan wanted to make Hajj, too. His mother also said she wanted to go. They both knew she needed help. His mother, now 70, suffers from arthritis. So Khan volunteered to help her.

Both men explained it is physically demanding to make Hajj, so all of the physical aspects of the journey were doubled for Khan, who pushed his mother in a wheelchair to perform all of the rites.

A record number of people from around the world – an estimated 40 million – made Hajj this year. That meant record numbers of people were pressing into the sacred places to see and participate in the rituals and prayers. That alone made the experience both beautiful and overwhelming, they said.

Both men explained how marvelous it was to look around and see so many different people representing every race, every color, every size possible.

Hassan said as he looked around at hundreds of thousands of worshippers, he thought how beautiful all the people were. At one moment, he caught a glimpse of seven or eight tall, well-muscled African men. "They all looked like statues in motion – exquisite human specimens answering the call of Allah."

Then the next moment, he saw a blond man with blue eyes.

In the journal he kept, Hassan wrote, "I nearly cried as I thought how magnificent the world would be if everyone could experience this moment or everyone would merely stop for just one moment and look at the world without their prejudices. I felt so grateful to Allah for giving me this moment."

Khan said, "I am more convinced than ever that Allah made us all equal, despite our race, sex, color and physical condition. This is the uniqueness of Islam – to see equality everywhere."

Muslims pray five times a day: at dawn, noon, midafternoon, sunset and nightfall. Once in Mecca, the men said it was a powerful experience just to listen to the Mu'adhdhin or caller to give the Adhan, the call to prayer.

"All those people thinking along the same lines," Hassan said. "I thanked Allah for letting me experience this."

But at times, they could also feel physical pain from being squeezed in with so many people.

On their trip, they each got to see the places that make up the central geography of their faith. Besides going to Mecca, they also went to Medina, where the Prophet Mohammed migrated and lived until he died, and Arafat, where Mohammed preached his last sermon.

Khan said, "Medina, where Prophet Mohammed's mosque and grave are located, is so magnificent one cannot turn his eyes back for the beauty of it. I am so grateful to Allah, the lord of the Universe, to allow me to visit Islam's founder's grave and to show my respect and to pray for mankind."

At the Holy Ka'ba, the first house of worship where the Prophet Mohammed worshipped, they also were told King Fahad came to clean the Ka'ba. Khan said seeing the Ka'ba was one of the highpoints of the trip for him. "I started crying. The Almighty had fulfilled my dream," he said.

Both men said each day the impact of their experience grew on them. "I felt cleansed each time I prayed," Hassan said.

People who know the two are also marking the change in them since they returned. Even Khan's 4½-year-old daughter sees a change in him, he said.

Although they attend the same mosque and live close to one another in Charleston, neither knew the other was also taking this important journey until they got back home. Now they are helping each other to keep the experience alive and share it with others.

Both said the trip gave them a glimpse into another and better world.

"For the first time in my life, I have hope for mankind," Hassan said.

Find out more about the fundamentals of Islam in a new column that starts in the Sunday Gazette-Mail. The new column is titled "What We Believe" and features the basics of various religions.