

Outpouring of Love and Support Lifts Sikh Community

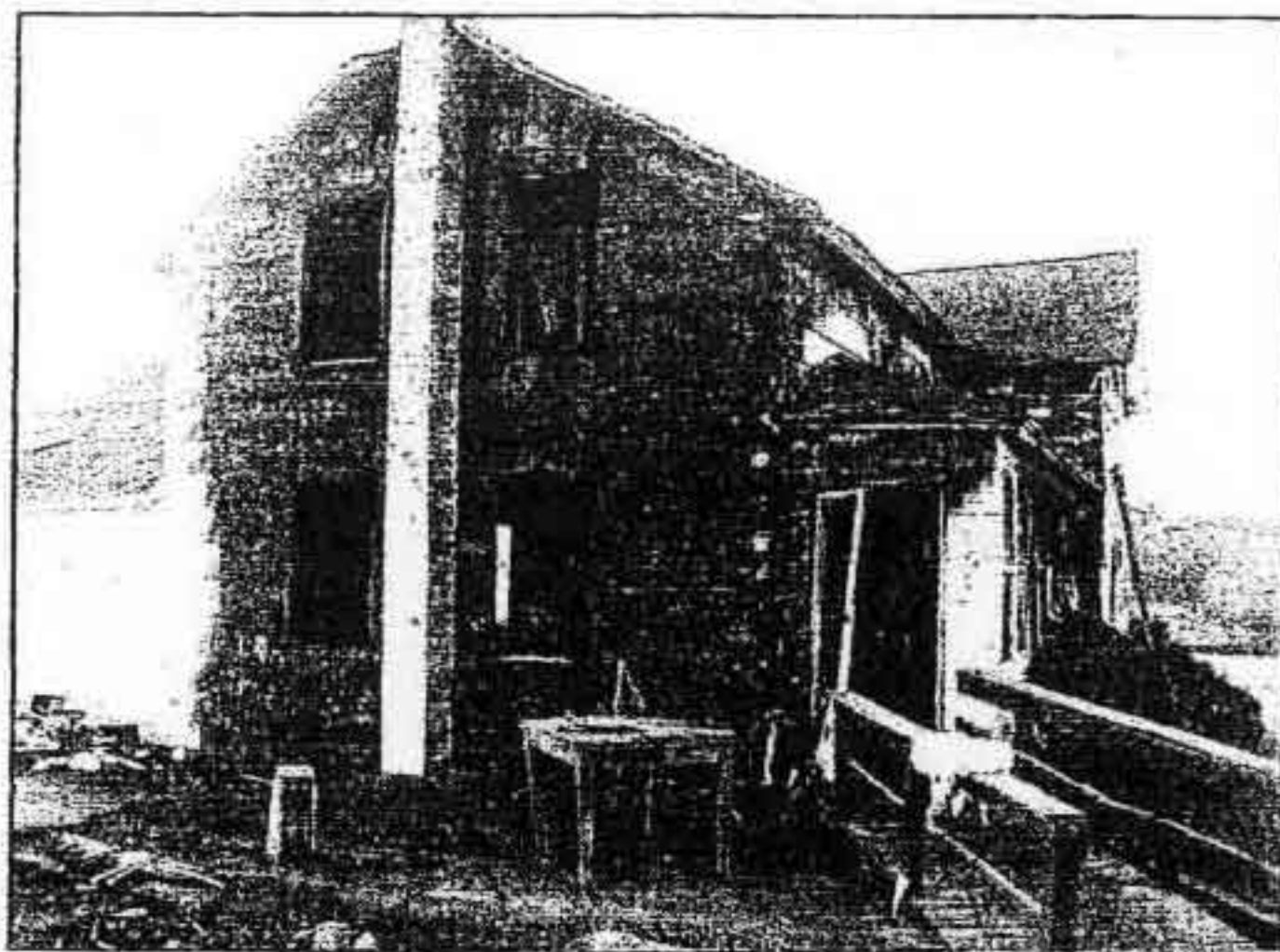
On November 18, 2001, arson severely damaged the main building at Gobind Sadan, the Sikh temple in Palermo, which is a retreat and worship center for Sikhs and friends all over the northeastern United States and Canada. At the time it was feared that this was an act inspired by anger at the terrorist bombings of September 11th.

Within hours, supporters of tolerance began to mobilize support for the Sikh community. (Sikhs are frequently mistaken for Muslims, due to the turbans that men of both faiths wear). Local churches offered the loan of their sanctuaries. Volunteers came to see if they could aid with the rebuilding. More than one hundred people of all faiths gathered at a vigil at the Center three days after the fire.

On December 14th, the Oswego County Sheriff's office announced the arrest, on arson charges, of two teen-aged county residents who reportedly admitted setting the fire. A third suspect was arrested on conspiracy charges. The suspects believed, according to their own statements, that worshippers at the center were supporters of Osama bin Laden, and set the fire after a night of drinking.

Charges that include federal hate crimes may be lodged against them.

Statements from the Sheriff and the local Sikh community appear on page 10. What follows is a reflection by Ralph Singh Rakieta, a leader in the local Sikh community, in appreciation of the powerful response of Central New Yorkers to this eruption of violence in its midst.



While the news that a Sikh shrine in Central New York was victim of arson flashed across the screen and made papers from India to Montana, the real story is what is occurring here on the ground. The outpouring of love in response to what is perceived as an act of hatred and ignorance is overwhelming.

It's hard to remember the order because all our phones were ringing and the answering machines were full. The Rabbi from the Temple which itself was victim of arson last year, called. The Imam from the Mosque who last year at the Temple vigil so eloquently said, "If one of our Holy places burns, all our holy places burn." Bob Hanson, Director of the IRC, has gotten the message out.

Getty, the head of a community task force organized when their

school was subjected to bomb scares, called to help. Ministers from local churches offered space for our gatherings. Calls from my office and countless friends continue even today.

Then there were the people we didn't even know. There was a message: "Hello, my name is Tracy. You don't know me but I heard about the church burning and I want to do something to help." It turns out Tracy is a veteran who quilts to raise money for various charities.

"I want you to know this is not the America I fought for. I am making a quilt - a patriotic one - and I want to raffle it off to help you rebuild. You know I fought with Sikhs and if there was anyone who I would want backing me up besides an American it would be a Sikh."

This was the second time a veteran had said something like that to me recently. The first time I was sitting in a restaurant before the "United We Stand" Rally - where 15,000 people were gathering in Clinton Square in the wake of the September 11th attacks. I was given the honor as a Sikh to address the crowd.

I was somewhat concerned about how I would be received, but, as is in all traditions, felt "the Lord is my shepherd." The Sikh tradition teaches us never to see anyone as an enemy - everyone is a friend. As I was eating, a man approached me with a veterans cap on - a purple heart veteran. I didn't know what to expect - I'd never seen him before.

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"I want to apologize to you on behalf of all Americans if any one has in any way treated you unkindly," he began. I could barely stop the tears. "This is not the America we fought for." I thanked him profusely and went out later to face the crowd in the Square tremendously uplifted and deliver a message which I hoped and prayed would be uplifting to them.

On another occasion I was riding in my car when a call came in. "Hello," said the voice. "My name is Harold. You don't know me, but we rebuild churches that were victims of arson, and if you'd allow us we would like to help you rebuild yours."

Harold recruits volunteers from all over to rebuild desecrated houses of worship. He offered to bring a team in and join with local volunteers to assist whatever contractor we choose in our rebuilding effort.

One Saturday morning at 9 AM the phone rang. "Hello this is Alice. I'm sorry that I'm retired, because I can only give you a little, but I want you to know how bad I feel that someone would do this terrible thing. I want to contribute to help rebuild your temple."

Tears streamed down my cheeks (they return even as I write this) and I choked up so much, that the caller sensed my silence and continued, "if you'll accept it." I told her that the very act of calling was enough of a contribution and she didn't have to give any money. "So many of us Americans feel this way but we don't reach out, I wanted to reach out to you."

I thanked her profusely and told her that we would hold a celebration to thank everyone and would let her know. She chuckled, "thank you very much, but I have a health problem and wouldn't be able to come." I responded, "Then we'll come to you." When I asked whether there was anything she needed, she said simply, "some new legs." So here is a retired woman, possibly housebound, picking up the phone to reach out to others in need.

So while the news of Gobind Sadan being burned has reached the world, the message that Gobind Sadan and its founder Baba Virsa Singh, and Guru Granth Sahib, the Holy scripture which survived the fire, stand for - love all people, love all religions, love all prophets, which is the fundamental message of all our traditions and the ideals that this great society was founded on, is drawing people together.

This is the real story out of which community is being rebuilt across all lines and divisions and out of which a beautiful new house of worship will rise as a tribute to the God that we all pray to and who has so mercifully brought us all together.

- Ralph Singh Rakieta