

FOLIO WEEKLY'S PERSON of the YEAR: Parvez Ahmed

By Susan Cooper Eastman
Photos by Walter Coker

Lost in the noise this year about Parvez Ahmed's nomination to the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission was the truth about who he is. While local extremists attempted to define who he is, and local lawmakers ignored who he is, the UNF business professor has never lost sight of his identity.

He didn't flinch when some Jacksonville City Councilmembers mirrored the intolerance of extremists. He didn't rage when the daily paper repeated attacks on him without verifying them. He didn't allow the controversy to disable his cause.

That's not the reason he's Folio Weekly Person of the Year. Parvez Ahmed isn't being recognized for what he endured, but because of what he represents. Namely, that Jacksonville can move beyond the rhetoric of hate and religious inflexibility, and embrace a multicultural, well-educated future. He offers hope that diversity is an achievable aim, and that the truth about all of us — good or ill — will out in the end.

Ahmed is a Muslim. He's also a father, a husband, a son, a university professor and an American citizen. The fact that all of those things are more important to him than labels is the reason he's Folio Weekly's Person of the Year for 2010.



Into Thin Air

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Parvez Ahmed slept in. After teaching a late-night investment class at the University of Pennsylvania, and working in his home office until after midnight, he took the rare luxury of sleeping past 8 a.m. His parents, visiting from Calcutta, milled about downstairs with his wife Savana, fixing breakfast and watching the morning news. When the first jetliner crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center at 8:46 a.m., Savana called up to her husband. Ahmed was just coming down the stairs when the second plane crashed at 9:03 a.m.

Like everyone in the United States, Ahmed's family spent the day in shock. By 10:30 a.m., both the south and north towers had collapsed, killing more than 3,000 people. By 4 p.m., CNN was reporting that radical Muslim extremist Osama bin Laden

and his al Qaeda terrorist organization was responsible.

The day changed Parvez Ahmed profoundly; changed the way he thought about his family, his work, his country. But it also changed the way the world thought about him. As he began to get his bearings late in the afternoon of Sept. 11, Ahmed thought back to the days following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995. Initially blamed on Muslim extremists — witnesses reported seeing three Middle Eastern-looking men flee the scene — people lashed out at anyone who looked vaguely Middle Eastern. Muslim families' homes were vandalized, their car windows smashed. Muslim women were taunted on the street and had their head scarves pulled off.

Ahmed feared another backlash, one worse than before, and felt it was important for mainstream Muslims to distinguish themselves from violent extremists. Late that

afternoon, he headed to the Islamic Center in Harrisburg, Pa., and told its leaders he thought they needed to issue a condemnation of the attacks. They asked him to draft the statement, and he did, later joining the NAACP on the steps of the capitol in Harrisburg to denounce terrorism. He also sent a letter to The Patriot-News, calling "the people who perpetrated this criminal act ... people who exist beyond the pale of any humanity." He added, "The religion of Islam unconditionally condemns any acts of terrorism."

The letter was published on Sept. 14, the same day the paper reported on the growing violence against Muslims nationally. On Sept. 20, shortly before President Bush addressed Congress and the nation about the attacks, Ahmed was invited to participate in a CBS News panel discussion on the issue. And later that year, he helped form and became state chair

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1). "He has just been an absolute gentleman," says Delaney. "It would be easy to snap and lash out. The natural inclination is to go, 'Screw you.'" 2). ACT! for America chapter head Randy McDaniels was behind much of the anti-Ahmed vitriol. It wasn't until months later that the Times-Union reported on his own credibility issues.

of the Pennsylvania chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, a Muslim advocacy and civil liberties group.

Ahmed hadn't anticipated living in the spotlight — indeed, had chosen an academic career well removed from controversy. But 9/11 made him realize the value of public participation, and the need to add his voice to an occasionally virulent debate. Speaking out on issues of faith and freedom wasn't just a concession to the times. It was a calling.

"After 9/11, it was very difficult to stay silent," he says. "It was not just a personal issue any longer."

Curriculum Vitae

Seated in his third-floor office on the University of North Florida campus, wearing a black suit with an American flag pin stuck in the lapel, Ahmed rolls a small planet Earth stress ball in his hands. For roughly an hour, he muses

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about cultural diversity in the United States. He values this pluralism, he says, partly as a result of growing up in India, a country with 22 constitutionally recognized languages. It is an inheritance he would like to share.

The only child of a Calcutta physician and his wife, Ahmed grew up with friends who were Buddhists, Hindus and Christians. Getting along with people from different traditions is a central tenet of the secular Indian democracy,



Working together despite different backgrounds, Parvez Ahmed says, "represents not just the best of American values, but the best of human values."

Ahmed says, and "it comes natural to me."

Education was paramount in Ahmed's childhood. His parents sent him to a Catholic private school, where he was taught by the famously rigorous Jesuit priests. He earned an undergraduate degree in mechanical engineering at Aligarh Muslim University near New Delhi, then moved with his wife Savana to the United States to study. He earned an MBA at Temple University and a doctorate in finance at the University of Texas. He and his wife became citizens in 2002, and moved to Jacksonville that same year.

As a professor, Ahmed's area of focus is on the quantifiable, the empirical. He studies derivatives and stock valuations, and attempts to create mathematical models for financial trends. It's not the kind of work that laypeople find fascinating (a book he co-authored in 2005 is titled, "Mutual Funds: Fifty Years of Research Findings"), but it appeals to Ahmed's love of logic and predictability. Since being hired as an assistant professor at the University of North Florida's Coggin School of Business in 2002, Ahmed's been named Outstanding Researcher three times, Outstanding Teacher once, and won a 2009 Fulbright Scholarship to study the economy of Bangladesh.

None of these credentials insulated him earlier this year when he was nominated to the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission.

"Say A Prayer To Your God"

Mayoral appointments to city boards are usually approved by the City Council without comment. But Ahmed's nomination to the commission stirred up a beast of bigotry coiled at the heart of the city. The reserved, respected professor suddenly found himself the focus of a radical, Islamophobic hate group. ACT! for America is founded on the belief that Muslims are trying to destroy the United States; the group opposes any Muslim holding public office. One ACT! member even told The Florida Times-Union that Ahmed would use his humble perch on the Human Rights Commission to impose Sharia Law in Jacksonville. By the time his nomination came before the City Council on April 26, a newly formed ACT! chapter had deluged the

council with emails alleging Ahmed's ties to terrorist organizations.

The group's "evidence" stemmed from Ahmed's involvement with the Council on American-Islamic Relations. CAIR was named an "unindicted co-conspirator" in a federal case about the funding of the radical Palestinian liberation group Hamas. Because CAIR was never formally charged, its leadership has complained it will never have an opportunity to answer the charges or clear its name. Ahmed has emphatically distanced himself from any terrorist organization, including Hamas, and said he "unequivocally condemned" them.

But the narrative caught fire, helped along by the fact that three conservative Christian City Councilmembers — Clay Yarborough, Don Redman, and Ray Holt (all members of the politically influential, socially conservative First Baptist Church) opposed his confirmation. First Baptist's relationship *vis-à-vis* Muslims has never been great; in 2002, then-Pastor Jerry Vines told a gathering of the annual Southern Baptist Convention that the Prophet Mohammad was a "demon-possessed pedophile." But Ahmed's confirmation brought that relationship to a new low. The April 26 council meeting, where

for this story, later apologized. But his public display of ignorance and intolerance only further inflamed Ahmed's opponents. Florida House Majority leader Rep. Adam Hasner (R-Delray Beach), who worked alongside Jacksonville ACT! chapter head Randy McDaniels for a group called the Florida Security Council, contacted several councilmembers about the vote. Privately, some councilmembers said they heard Hasner was threatening to withhold local funding if Ahmed was confirmed. Council President and First Baptist member Richard Clark voted to confirm Ahmed, but fully six councilmembers (Daniel Davis, Ray Holt, Glorious Johnson, Jack Webb, Redman and Yarborough) voted against him, based on nothing more than innuendo and fear.

ACT! didn't end its offensive after the vote. It recently earned front-page coverage for leveling unsubstantiated claims that Ahmed had publicly supported terrorism in an October speech. That fiction, in turn, prompted Council President Webb (one of the six who opposed Ahmed's appointment) to suggest last month that it might be necessary to remove him from the Human Rights Commission. (Commission members can only

"Lashing out would not have served any purpose," says Ahmed about the confirmation process.

Ahmed's confirmation was coming to a vote, began with a sectarian group prayer (Redman ended his invocation, "In Jesus' name"), and the first question went to Redman.

"I would like to ask you to pray to your god," Redman announced, looking very proud of himself. "Could you do that for us here?"

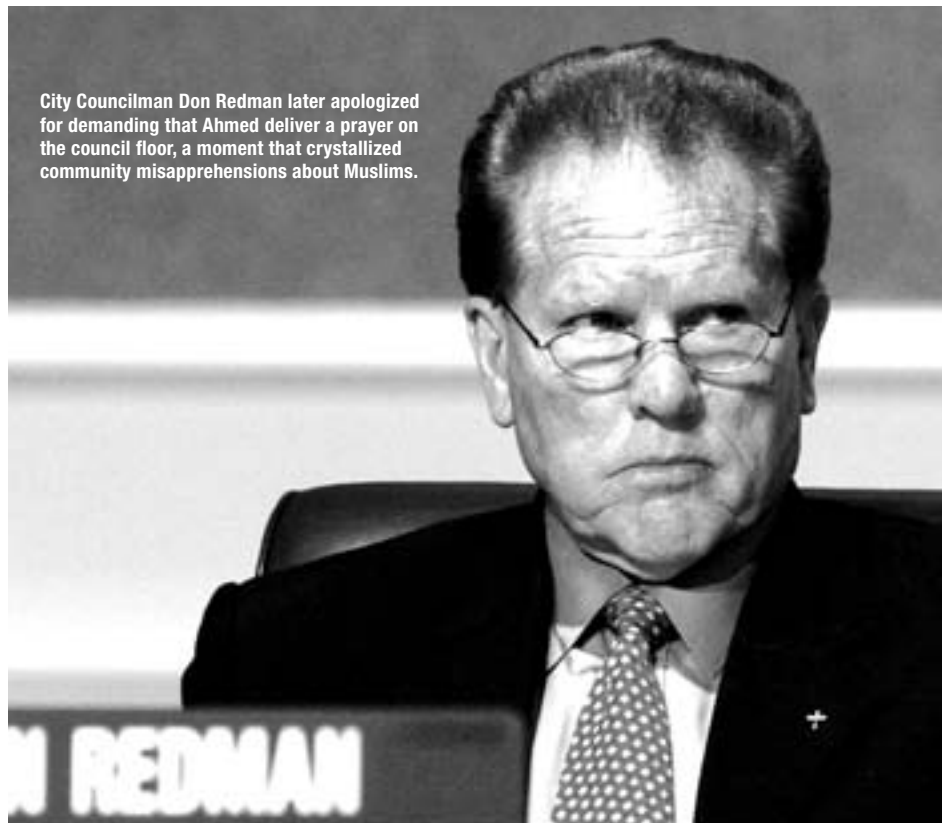
The audience gasped. One person shouted an objection. Then-Chief Deputy General Counsel Cindy Laquidara, keenly aware that a Constitutional trespass was in motion, rushed to the podium to interrupt. The Times-Union's Ron Littlepage later called it the most embarrassing moment in his 20 years as a columnist.

Redman, who declined to be interviewed

be removed for missing too many meetings.)

It wasn't until Ahmed complained about the T-U's irresponsible coverage that the paper actually delved into reporting on his accusers, including Randy McDaniels. On Dec. 11, the paper reported that the ACT! chapter head owed the state more than \$500,000 in fines for taking money for contracting jobs he either never began or never completed. McDaniels was also arrested in Duval County for domestic battery and passing worthless checks (charges later dropped) and DUI (to which he pleaded no contest). (McDaniels did not return repeated calls for comment on this story.)

Meanwhile, the former FBI agent McDaniels



City Councilman Don Redman later apologized for demanding that Ahmed deliver a prayer on the council floor, a moment that crystallized community misapprehensions about Muslims.

had trotted out to “substantiate” concerns about Ahmed apparently resigned from the Bureau in 2008. The T-U noted that court records alleged he’d had sex with a witness while investigating corruption of former U.S Rep. William Jefferson of Louisiana, then tried to get the woman to donate \$75,000 to an “anti-terrorism” organization.

My Skin Is Brown

Ahmed will never be mistaken for a good ol’ boy. And he doesn’t expect to be treated with any special deference. But he admits he is shocked by the disparity between his own public reception and that of someone like Randy McDaniels. Ahmed notes without conceit that he is a respected college professor, someone who has volunteered many hours to participate in interfaith dialogue and bridge cultural differences. He has the backing of the current and former mayors, as well as highly regarded organizations like the NAACP, OneJax, the Center for Advancement of Human Rights at Florida State University and the Community Foundation.

Yet when credence was given, it was not to him, but to McDaniels. “I have to ask if this was, in part, because my skin is brown,” says Ahmed.

Still, Ahmed believes most people in Jacksonville are open to learning about other faiths, and that they respect others’ cultural traditions. And he has faith that multiculturalism is at the core of his adopted country’s success and future. “Despite knowing that we come from different perspectives and different cultural traditions, we choose to work together,” he says. “I think that represents not just the best of American values, but the best of human values. It is humanity at its finest.”

Even the ACT! dustup hasn’t been all bad. One benefit is a big upswing in invitations to speak about Islam.

“Everything is not all gloomy and dark out there,” he says. “There is quite a bit of sunlight and quite a bit of joy.”

Ahmed’s public appearances to discuss Islam aren’t just one-sided speeches. During an eight-part discussion that he and Riverside Presbyterian Church Senior Pastor Stephen Goyer held on Christian and Muslim faiths, he was surprised to learn that the Bible contained many outdated statements about the role of women in society, similar to those often criticized in the Qur’an as cruel or outdated. Though most scholars believe that such passages

reflect a cultural context and aren’t literal proscriptions for how women should live, those disposed to attack Islam use them as fodder.

“When people attack [Islam] based on certain texts, I ask myself if they have examined the texts in their own faith traditions,” he says. “If they did, they would realize this happens in every faith tradition. When you read without proper context, anything can be misconstrued.”

Ahmed notes that both terrorists and people who believe terrorism is at the heart of Islam misinterpret the Qur’an in the same literalist way. “In some sense, it is ironic,” he says. “[They] are misreading the same texts, they are making the same fallacy.”

Spotting those kinds of logical inconsistencies can be frustrating. So can the rote discrimination he encounters when traveling. Ahmed says he is always pulled out of the line at the airport, questioned, his bags searched. The fact that he hasn’t let his experience devolve into bitterness is something that inspires Pastor Goyer, behavior he says models that of Gandhi or Martin Luther King.

“He has experienced discrimination himself, yet he works for reconciliation, peace and justice,” Goyer says. “He is a living witness to what Christ’s presence in the world is all about.”

Howdy Neighbor!

When Ahmed, his wife and their two children moved into a new cul-de-sac off St. Johns Bluff Road in 2002, theirs was one of the first homes on the street. One of their few neighbors was law enforcement supply salesman Robert Gonzales. Though multicultural in his own home — Gonzales is of Mexican descent, his wife is Japanese — Gonzales admits he bought into Muslim stereotypes before he got to know Ahmed. Like his friends and family members, he believed that all Muslims hated Christianity and Western culture, and most were probably terrorists or terrorist sympathizers. He’d been told the Qur’an defined people as either believers or infidels. Being a Christian, he figured he qualified as an infidel.

That didn’t stop Gonzales from planting himself on Ahmed’s driveway to say hello, or peppering his new neighbor with questions. Not all were salutary; the first thing he asked Ahmed was if he and his family were American citizens. But the chats have led to hours of conversations about religion, faith, social justice, business and anything else that comes to mind. The Ahmeds invited the Gonzaleses to a traditional Indian

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meal, and Gonzales coaches Ahmed’s nine-year-old son Hashim in football. Gonzales says it’s been a transformative friendship.

“I’m generally a shallow kind of guy. It’s the truth,” he says. “One of the things Parvez has helped me to understand is perception. Right now, when I see somebody of Muslim descent, I don’t automatically think, ‘terrorist,’ because I personally know someone of Muslim descent.”

Given his own evolution, Gonzales says

“He’s a better man than me,” says Ahmed’s neighbor Robert Gonzales. “I think I would have punched somebody in the nose.”

he watched his friend’s confirmation process with disappointment, and occasional alarm. He kept a close watch on the Ahmeds’ house throughout, alert to the threat of retaliation. (Those concerns were heightened after someone set off a pipe bomb at the nearby Islamic Center on May 10, exactly two weeks after the vote to appoint Ahmed to the Human Rights Commission.) And though Gonzales didn’t personally get involved in the confirmation process, he saw in news coverage of it the patient educator who’d answered his own boorish questions. For instance, Ahmed willingly answered a list of questions from Yarborough ranging from everything to gay

marriage and the Pledge of Allegiance.

“He’s a better man than me,” says Gonzales. “I think I would have punched somebody in the nose. It was almost like a witch hunt. It was all based on his religious background.”

Gonzales isn’t an idealist. He doesn’t believe his friendship with Ahmed will solve the problem of intolerance. But he does believe it can be part of the solution. Now, if family or friends express negative stereotypes about Muslims, Gonzales says he speaks up. “You can’t change ignorance. Ignorance is not willing to change,” he says. “But I can remind them each time they say something that it is just stupid!”

“The Wrong Guy”

University of North Florida President John Delaney spoke to many people during the maelstrom over Ahmed, including many who feared he was a Muslim extremist. The former Jacksonville mayor says his message was the same to each of them: “You got the wrong guy.”

Delaney pictures Ahmed as a figure in the Jackie Robinson mold. The African-American baseball player broke the color line by integrating the Major League, and endured years of race-baiting and threats without losing his cool. Delaney thinks Ahmed has a Robinson-like equanimity. “He has just been an absolute gentleman,” says Delaney. “It would be easy to snap and lash out and I’m sure he felt like doing that. When Redman wanted to meet with him to apologize, the natural inclination is to go, ‘Screw you.’”

Ahmed counters he’s just doing what a leader has to do. “Any of us in a leadership capacity, even in my capacity as a university professor, has certain responsibilities,” he says. “You have to exercise judgment and prudence. Lashing out at that point would not have served any purpose. We have to work toward understanding.”

The work continues, but understanding remains elusive. Admits Ahmed, “It’s just a challenge getting to that point.” □

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Ahmed’s wife, Savana, says being able to deal with stress in a methodical, rational way is one of her husband’s great talents.